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KURDISH-CHRISTIAN INTERCOMMUNAL RELATIONS:  
THE SECTARIANIZATION OF NORTHERN OTTOMAN-IRANIAN  
BORDERLANDS, 1830-1914

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## **Dedication**

To my mother

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## **Abstract**

KURDISH-CHRISTIAN INTERCOMMUNAL RELATIONS:  
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BORDERLANDS, 1830-1914

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2018

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The catastrophic Armenian genocide of 1915 has long set the trend for the study of intercommunal relations between Kurdish and Christian groups of Ottoman East Anatolia and northwest Iran. In the process, Russian and the Ottoman Empires have been identified as key players in exploiting ethnoreligious distinctions to the advantage of imperial centers and at the expense of the inhabitants of Ottoman East Anatolia. However, the crucial impact that the process of Ottoman-Iranian boundary-making left on intercommunal relations has been understudied. This dissertation traces the impact of the frontier delimitation process on intercommunal relations among ethnoreligious groups straddling the northwest stretch of the Ottoman-Iranian borders. This study proposes that the process of making the Ottoman-Iranian boundaries, which involved redefinitions of sovereignty and subjecthood as preambles to the emergence of the modern states of Iran and Turkey, led to an intense imperial rivalry over the religious

identity of imperial subjects of the frontier. Interest and investment in the religious identities of overlapping borderland populations sprang from rival empires' desire to rejuvenate their compromised sovereignty among their frontiers through strengthening their loyalty and allegiance. The presence of foreign missions and consuls and native subjects with extralegal statuses complicated such imperial efforts, and ultimately worked as contributing factor to the sectarianization of the borderland populations' communal visions and boundaries. The missions, foreign consuls, and travelers helped to construct a sectarian narrative of intercommunal conflict as they too stressed the religious distinctions of different communities through disproportionate attention to the welfare and education of the Christian minorities. Over time, imperial and missionary rivalry and discriminatory policies of prioritizing the wishes of one group over another's, led to the emergence of sectarian communities with distinctive communal boundaries and aspirations that could hardly be reconciled. When wartime conditions were imposed on the borderland populations in 1915, sectarianized communities brutalized each other, sending untold number of people to their deaths in the process.



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## Introduction:

In 1843, a large number of Ottoman East Anatolia's Kurdish tribes formed a coalition along the northern stretch of the Ottoman-Iranian frontier to resist the Ottoman state's centralization campaigns. In June of that year, the Kurdish coalition invaded the Nestorian Christian tribes of the mountainous district of Hakkari, slaying some several thousand in the process. Women, children, and tribal fighters were subjected to waves of extreme brutality. Through missionary accounts, ghastly reports of mangled bodies and violated and enslaved Nestorian women and children trickled into the European and the American press, raising outcries against Muslim 'fanaticism.' These atrocities, while reinforcing the stereotype of the Ottoman sultan as "the Sick Man of Europe" inherently resistant to reform, were also taken as testament to the Kurdish tribes' natural predisposition to violence. From then on, the Kurds collectively entered the Western imagination as fanatical marauders engaging in an age-old crusade against small remnants of the ancient followers of Christ.<sup>1</sup> The recurrence of intercommunal violence among Ottoman East Anatolia's Kurds and Christians (Armenians and Nestorians) in the 1890s, under very different circumstances, further stigmatized the image of the Kurds as nothing more than bandits bent on death and destruction. Visiting the Nestorian villagers of the Ottoman-Iranian borderlands in 1890, the veteran British traveler Isabella L. Bishop recycled a stereotypical description of the Kurds and their relations with their Christian neighbors:

Robbery is as much his [Kurds'] element as war, and as his religion does not recognise the appropriation of the goods of a Christian as an unholy act, he prays upon the Syrian [Nestorian] and Armenian peasantry with a clear conscience. To

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<sup>1</sup> David Gaunt, Jan Beṭ-Şawoçe, and Racho Donef, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia during World War I* (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2006), 32. Gaunt argues that the event marked a milestone in attracting public European attention in favor of religious minorities.

rob them by violence and “demand,” month after month and year after year, till they have nearly nothing left, to kill them if they resist, to leave them for a while to retrieve their fortunes, - “*to let the sheep’s wool grow*,” as their phrase is – and then to rob them again, is the simple story of the relation between Kurd and Christian.<sup>2</sup>

Such crude understanding and conceptual framing of the relations between the ethno-religious communities of the region became more entrenched in popular and scholarly literature as intercommunal violence climaxed during World War I, leading to massacres and forced displacements of around one million Armenians and thousands of Nestorians. In the thick of the wartime atrocities, Abraham Yohannan, an American-Nestorian scholar, described the massacres as merely another episode in a perpetual history of persecution by “those most inveterate foes of Christianity.”<sup>3</sup> He claimed:

The atrocities that are being committed now against these harmless and helpless Christians in Turkey and Persia are of a long standing character. Sometime the storm has abated its fury, only to start up again with increased energy and the present relentless persecutions and massacres are but the culmination of the generations of terror.<sup>4</sup>

The scale of the communal destruction during the war was so enormous that it has understandably preoccupied much of the scholarship on late Ottoman East Anatolia, causing questions of justice and culpability to dominate the conceptual frameworks of the majority of the scholarship on the region.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the Turkish state’s continued

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<sup>2</sup> Isabella L. Bishop, “The Shadow of the Kurd,” *The Contemporary Review*, 1866-1900 59 (June 1891): 819.

<sup>3</sup> Abraham Yohannan, *The Death of a Nation; or, the Ever Persecuted Nestorians or Assyrian Christians ... With 27 Illustrations and a Map*. (Pp. xx. 170. G.P. Putnam’s Sons: New York & London, 1916), 132. See also William Walker Rockwell, *The Pitiful Plight of the Assyrian Christians in Persia and Kurdistan* (Pp. 72. American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief: New York, 1916).

<sup>4</sup> Yohannan, 115–16. For a more recent and detailed account of the massacres of the Assyrians in Iran and the Ottoman Empire see, David Gaunt & et al, *Massacres, resistance, protectors: Muslim-Christian relations in Eastern Anatolia during World War I* (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2006); also see David Gaunt, “Sayfo Genocide: The Culmination of an Anatolian Culture of Violence,” in *Let them not return. Sayfo - The genocide against the Assyrian, Syriac, and Chaldean Christians in the Ottoman Empire*, eds. Gaunt, Atto and Soner O. Barthoma (Oxford: Berghahn Books Ltd., 2017), 54-69.

<sup>5</sup> This is an argument made by Brad Ronald Dennis in his dissertation titled, “Explaining Coexistence and Conflict in Eastern Anatolia, 1800-1878” (PhD diss., The University of Utah, 2015), 2-3.

resistance to acknowledge the Armenian genocide has led scholars to cast the net wider in their search for documentary evidence concerning the Young Turks' genocidal intentions.<sup>6</sup> In the process, intercommunal massacres of 1915 and 1918 on the Iranian side of the frontier, in which untold numbers of Nestorians, Kurds, Armenians, and Azeris were sent to their deaths, have also been examined as events governed by similar dynamics underlying the Armenian genocide.<sup>7</sup> For instance, in a recently published collection of articles that seeks to establish the massacres of the Nestorians in 1915 as a forgotten or an "unremembered" genocide, David Gaunt observes that "it has required painstaking research to rediscover the Assyrian genocide behind the Armenian genocide."<sup>8</sup> All this is told and retold while the counter massacres of thousands of Sunni Kurds and Shi'i Azeris remain unacknowledged.

While the existence of broad similarities in the general causes underlying the intercommunal violence is beyond doubt, it is nevertheless simplistic to assert that geographic and temporal proximity of the conflicts and the ultimate destruction and exodus of the Ottoman Nestorian community necessarily justifies the existence of shared dynamics on all levels. Such an approach risks overstatement of high politics and the

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<sup>6</sup> Taner Akçam, *From Empire to Republic: Turkish Nationalism and the Armenian Genocide* (London; New York; New York, NY: Zed Books ; Distributed in the USA by Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 231. See also David Gaunt, et al., *Let them not return. Sayfo - The genocide against the Assyrian, Syriac, and Chaldean Christians in the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Berghahn Books Ltd. 2017), 1-2. There are a large number of studies on the Armenian Genocide among which the following stand out: See Suny, Naimark, and Fatma Müge Göçek, *A question of genocide: Armenians and Turks at the end of the Ottoman Empire* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015); Ronald Grigor Suny, *"They can live in the desert but nowhere else": a history of the Armenian genocide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Raymond H Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited 2011);

<sup>7</sup> David Gaunt, Naures Atto, and Soner Onder Barthoma, *Let Them Not Return. Sayfo - The Genocide against the Assyrian, Syriac, and Chaldean Christians in the Ottoman Empire*. (Oxford: Berghahn Books Ltd., 2017), 15–16.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 21. See also HANNIBAL TRAVIS, "Constructing the 'Armenian Genocide': How Scholars Unremembered the Assyrian and Greek Genocides in the Ottoman Empire," in *Hidden Genocides*, Power, Knowledge, Memory (Rutgers University Press, 2014), 170, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/stable/j.ctt5hjdfm.14>.

international context at the expense of careful consideration of the intricate social fabric of the region, the agency of the local actors, and a balanced examination of communal change in the *longue durée*.<sup>9</sup> It is the aim of this study to analyze the evolution of intercommunal relations among the understudied ethno-religious groups straddling the frontiers of Qajar Iran and the Ottoman Empire. In doing so, it seeks to highlight the central role played by imperial rivalry over frontier security as played out along the northwest stretch of the Ottoman-Iranian frontier. In the process, particular focus will be placed on the questions of subjecthood and belonging and the development of divergent communal visions among the overlapping borderland populations of southeast Anatolia and northwest Iran. It will be argued that through imperial rivalry over definitively regulating the subject status of indifferent border populations religion gradually became the principle marker of identity and the forum for staking political claims. While the imperial will receives such emphasis as the source of top-down reform projects aimed at rejuvenating central sovereignty, the role of local tribal and communal leaders, foreign missions and consuls, and Qajar and Ottoman provincial elites will also receive due attention. The overarching argument will be that imperial concern over frontier security led rival empires to invest in the religious identity of their overlapping borderland populations with the aim of binding them more firmly to the imperial center. Foreign missions and consuls similarly played a role in highlighting the sectarian identity of

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<sup>9</sup> David Gaunt has written extensively on the fate of the Nestorians of Hakkari and other Christian sects such as the Jacobites of Tur Abedin, the Chaldeans of Mosul whom he has chosen to collectively refer to as Assyrians. In his co-authored book, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian relations in Eastern Anatolia during World War I* (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2006.) he has dealt at length with the question of genocide and the destruction of the Assyrian communities in the Ottoman Hakkari mountains and the plains of Urmia in Iran. The authors take a similar stance as that adopted by the majority of the scholarship on the Armenian genocide by focusing on late Ottoman East Anatolia and pursuing the questions of justice and culpability. The purpose behind writing the monograph stems from the belief that the Assyrian genocide has been overshadowed by the Armenian genocide and thus it needs to receive attention on its own terms.

Christian communities as they focused exclusively on the improvement of the material and spiritual conditions of their Christian clients. By doing so, these foreign patrons helped to construct a sectarian narrative of conflict as they only focused on the conditions of the Christian groups in the tribal world where rank and social prestige outweighed the influence of religion. The missionaries' biased reporting and framing of conflict as motivated by religious hatred also contributed much to the sectarianization of intercommunal relations.

The scholarly literature on late Ottoman East Anatolia has tended to focus on religious minorities and as such has remained one-dimensional in its approach. One primary reason for this methodological limitation lies in the scholarship's influence by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Orientalist discourse that tended to ignore the multi-ethnic nature of the Ottoman Empire in favor of viewing it as a Muslim state with large Christian minorities.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, the failure of Kurds and Armenians to achieve state-hood after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire has caused the minority question of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to reappear in the form of minorities' nationalist struggles against the modern ethnocentric nation-states of the Middle East. The wide currency of theories of nationalism in historical inquiry in the last century largely account for the persistence of the nationalist discourse as the guiding principle of most studies on East Anatolia and Qajar Iran's various communities.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ussama Samir Makdisi, "Fantasies of the Possible: Community, History and Violence in the Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Empire" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1997), 20.

<sup>11</sup> The majority of the scholarship produced on modern Kurdish history in one way or another addresses the question of Kurdish nationalism. Such scholarship tends to deploy documentary evidence on southeast Anatolia and northwest Iran in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in order to establish the origins, evolution, and failure, and resurgence of Kurdish nationalist movements. The following titles are only a few among the large number of books that employ such a conceptual framework. Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: its origins and development* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006). Before the publication of Jwaideh's book, his dissertation (1960) under the same title had long served as a popular source of reference among scholars. David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London; New York: I.B. Taurus, 1996); Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: the Social and Political*

Such approaches in the historiography on late Ottoman East Anatolia and Northwest Qajar Iran, especially in regards to studies concerned with the Armenian and Kurdish questions, have stymied efforts to integrate scholarship. Consequently, studies have tended to examine the history of the region's populations within what has emerged as separate fields of Armenian Studies, Kurdish Studies, Turkish Studies, Iranian Studies, and more recently the minorities of the Middle East. Having propped up the Ottoman Empire as a Muslim state lording it over its Christian and later non-Turkish minorities, this approach has concerned itself with two kinds of interpretations. Partisan histories examine historical trajectories as either the struggle of national minorities for state-hood or as the Ottoman state's deliberate or inadvertent attempts to root out such aspirations on grounds of its Islamic Turkish political culture or for reasons of state security. Thus, such studies as Armenian-Ottoman and Kurdish-Ottoman relations have enjoyed widespread popularity among scholars without attempts to integrate the communities' intertwined histories. In scholarly and public histories of this kind, disparate Armenian and Kurdish communities and tribes over vast geographical expanses are usually collapsed together and presented as communal monoliths on the march towards their final destination of national sovereignty. The frictions and conflicts occurring in the process emerge as wars of resistance against oppressive Ottoman and Iranian states with a marked disregard to the communities' varied and more immediate material, mundane, and self-centered interests.

Moreover, the geographical and temporal scope of the studies concerned with East Anatolia's groups has also presented an enduring challenge. This region, which

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*Structure of Kurdistan* (New Jersey: Zed Books, 1992); Gerard Chaliand, ed., *A People Without a Country: Kurds and Kurdistan* (London: Zed Press, 1980); Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, *Kurdistan and the Kurds* (Prague: Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, 1965); Chris Kutschera, *Le Mouvement National Kurde* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979); David Romano, *Kurdish nationalist movements : opportunity, mobilization and identity* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 2006).

came to be referred to as the *vilayat-i sitte* or the Six Provinces in European and Ottoman parlance after the Congress of Berlin in 1878, has become the source of scholarly preoccupation. There are several reasons for such a preponderance of attention to this region. First, this so-called six provinces, where Armenian communities of the Ottoman Empire were largely concentrated, became the focal point of the Eastern Question following the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-78. The Armenian communities of East Anatolia were promised that their situation would improve in consequence of European-led reform projects. Such promises of reforms not only ignored the majority Kurdish population but also branded them as marauders to be merely restrained. The great powers' promises of enforcing reform schemes nevertheless remained a dead letter on paper as the Anglo-Russian rivalry over the Eastern Question and the balance of power in European politics extended to the Armenian question as well.

The second reason for scholarly preoccupation with Ottoman East Anatolia has to do with the Europeans' biases. European diplomats, travelers, and missionaries viewed the region and its inhabitants through racial and national notions that were becoming increasingly popular. Preoccupation with racial theories sprang from the obsession of Europeans with rationality and the drive to locate "a common measure of fact, a universal conceptual currency, so to speak, for the general characterization of things."<sup>12</sup> The concept of race constituted one such standard measurement to study social relations in human history. Thus, it was common among European travelers and diplomats to refer to the region alternatively as the Armenian and Kurdish races occupying a stretch of land that they variously termed Ancient Armenia, Kurdistan, or Armeno-Kurdistan.<sup>13</sup> Such

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<sup>12</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 2nd ed, New Perspectives on the Past (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 2008), 21.

<sup>13</sup> In the introduction to a report on the question of reforms in Ottoman East Anatolia, Major Henry Trotter, Consul of Kurdistan, referred to the difficulty involved in classifying the diverse population into neat categories. He noted, "the numerous different races, creeds, and languages that combine to make up the



nomenclatures found increased political significance with grave consequences over time as the assumptions embedded within these names percolated among the native inhabitants. The indigenous population gradually adopted such Eurocentric framings of social relations and their sociopolitical challenges in what became an extended process of recasting communal boundaries based on religious and ethnonational distinctions.

Finally, the abundance of evidence from the accounts of missionaries, consuls, diplomats, congresses in different European languages, Armenian church records and political party programs and correspondences, along with numerous Russian and Ottoman documents produced about this disputed frontier region's inhabitants, has facilitated research. On the reverse of this trend is the scarcity of research on the Kurds as there are fewer written records on the Kurds and the extant documentation in Ottoman and Iranian archives has either remained untapped or hard to access. Hence, the scholarship's disproportionate focus on the Armenian Question and the 1915 Armenian Genocide.

The third challenge, as stated above, has been the predominance of questions of culpability and justice, which has informed both modernist [the Ottoman Empire was inherently incapable of reform and modernization) and structuralist (the conflict occurred largely as a result of Great Power intervention in Ottoman affairs) historiographical approaches.<sup>14</sup> This is, by no means, to say that the Armenian and Assyrian genocides do not merit the attention they have received. Rather, it is to argue that the pervasiveness of this approach to scholarly research has, on one hand, led to a general disregard of the historical period prior to the 1878 Congress of Berlin when intercommunal dynamics

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population of Armeno-Kurdistan are mixed up in such almost inextricable confusion that it is a difficult matter to describe them, or to know where to begin or how to end." Henry Trotter, Constantinople, October 30, 1880, *Records of the Kurds*, Vol. 3, 281.

<sup>14</sup> Brad Ronald Dennis, "Explaining Coexistence and Conflict in Eastern Anatolia, 1800-1878" (PhD diss., The University of Utah, 2015), 3-5.

were anchored in a traditional hierarchical system in which socio-political rank and prestige trumped communal mobilization on the basis of sectarian motivations. On the other hand, predominance of questions of justice and culpability have led to a disproportionate focus in the scholarship on the 1890s and the wartime atrocities. The result has been a teleological and perfunctory investigations of the earlier decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the aim of substantiating the inevitability of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century atrocities within what has been dubbed a culture of violence.<sup>15</sup>

This concerted focus on the endemic violence of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century between Muslim and Christian groups has led the scholarly and general readership to believe that intercommunal relationships were primarily determined by the religious identities of communities. Granted, as Bruce Masters has proposed, “religious faith served as an internalized anchor to each individual's sense of broader community and as the primary signifier of his or her identity to those outside.” Moreover, “religion possessed an inherently political dimension in Ottoman society.”<sup>16</sup> However, that did not mean that religion was the primary motivation for political communal mobilization. In fact, in the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as Ussama Makdisi has pointed out in the context of Lebanon, societies were “dominated by an elite hierarchy in which secular rank rather than religious affiliation defined politics”<sup>17</sup> Religious and social prestige crossed communal boundaries and as Adam Becker has shown, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman

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<sup>15</sup> For instance, David Gaunt’s “Sayfo Genocide: The Culmination of an Anatolian Culture of Violence,” in *Let them not return. Sayfo - The genocide against the Assyrian, Syriac, and Chaldean Christians in the Ottoman Empire*, eds. Gaunt, Atto and Soner O. Barthoma (Oxford: Berghahn Books Ltd., 2017) covers a breathtaking geographic and temporal scope from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century up through World War I years in one single article with the aim of substantiating his claim that certain dynamics led to the entrenchment of a culture of violence.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce Alan Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Rootsof Sectarianism*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 5.

<sup>17</sup> Ussama Samir Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2000), 6.

Hakkari, “sectarian hatred was not the motivating force of social life, and just as complex alliances and relations existed, so the aura of holiness could be pandemic.”<sup>18</sup>

What is largely missing in the scholarship on intercommunal relations in Ottoman East Anatolia is the central role played by the efforts to demarcate the Ottoman-Iranian boundaries, a process inexorably tied to the questions of subjecthood and nationality, with nationality being defined as “the concern of those whose membership is least certain.”<sup>19</sup> Sabri Ateş has done an excellent investigation of the history of making the borderlands. His study has largely focused on the imperial and colonial imperatives behind the initiative to delimit the boundaries and the locals’ participation in the drawn-out process. Ateş has engaged with the issue of politics of subjecthood and sectarianism. However, the wide scope of his study, which includes the entire stretch of the Ottoman-Iranian borderland from Mount Ararat in the vicinity of the Russian Caucasus to the Persian Gulf in the south, has left much to be done in terms of the study of intercommunal relations among the northwestern stretch of the borderland, where much of the violence in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was centered.<sup>20</sup>

It is the aim of this study to shift the focus to this important aspect of the change in intercommunal relations. Since the conquest of the Caucasus by Russia in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the status of the Ottoman-Iranian borderlands changed dramatically. From representing a political backwater for centuries, the Russo-Ottoman-Iranian borderland triangular space, encompassing parts of the Caucasus, East Anatolia, and Azerbaijan, transformed into a site of imperial rivalry over subjecthood of the overlapping borderland

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<sup>18</sup> Adam H. Becker, *Revival and Awakening: American Evangelical Missionaries in Iran and the Origins of Assyrian Nationalism* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2015), 64.

<sup>19</sup> Will Hanley, “What Ottoman Nationality Was and Was Not,” *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 3, no. 2 (2016): 278.

<sup>20</sup> Brad R. Dennis’ dissertation “Explaining Conflict”, Michael Reynolds’s *Shattering Empires*, and Sabri Ateş’s *Iranian-Ottoman Borderlands* are among the exception which this study draws inspiration from and seeks to contribute to.

populations. Gradually, as Russia consolidated its hold over the Caucasus, from where it projected power into Ottoman East Anatolia and the Iranian province of Azerbaijan, the relative insignificance of the frontiers and the nationality of its diverse populations, comprised of Nestorian and Kurdish *ashirtes* [transhumant and nomadic tribes], and Armenian and Azeri cultivators gave way to imperial rivalry over securing the loyalties of these overlapping populations through the medium of religion.

Russia had for long styled itself the protector of the Orthodox Christians of the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Iran and it frequently framed its hostilities with the Ottomans as attempts to protect Orthodox Christians and to liberate them from Ottoman oppression. Since the Crimean War (1853-56), which was fought over Russia's and France's claims to protection of Christian sites and relics in the Holy Land, sectarianism, defined as deployment of religion for the political purpose of communal mobilization, became more commonplace as the locals adopted these frameworks and joined Russia and the Ottomans in their ostensibly religious wars. Imperial rivalry over shared frontiers and the loyalty of the borderlanders expressed itself through claims to protection of communities based on their religious affiliations. Both Qajar Iran and the Ottoman Empire joined the game of politics of subjecthood as they too began to appeal to the religious identities of their frontier subjects. In order to advance their irredentist claims to disputed frontier districts, the Ottomans began highlighting the Sunni identity of the Kurds and launched efforts to win their allegiance. The Qajar officials reacted by claiming to be the protectors of Shi'i subjects in southern Ottoman Iraq, where Iranian Shi'i *mujtahids* and clerics engaged in vigorous evangelical efforts to convert the settling Arab tribes of the marshlands.<sup>21</sup> Thus, as Ussama Makdisi has argued, through the *tanzimat* and the

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<sup>21</sup> Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton: University Press, 1994).

European-mandated reforms and the Ottoman-Iranian border disputes and politics of subjecthood, religion became the site of a colonial and imperial encounter, ultimately resulting in the transformation of the meaning of religion itself. The reforms and the border disputes over borderlanders and their subject status emphasized the sectarian identity and affiliations of communities to one imperial center against another, in the process foregrounding religion as the primary and most “authentic basis for political claims.”<sup>22</sup>

The issue of the emergence of a sectarian culture among communities straddling the Ottoman-Iranian frontiers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century became entangled with another important development. In the wake of the 1878 Congress of Berlin, which officially sanctioned the legitimacy of the national idea as the source of political sovereignty, select Caucasian and Ottoman Armenian activists began to claim their national rights by propagating an ethno-nationalist consciousness among their coreligionists in East Anatolia. While ostensibly secular, the Armenian nationalist movement, like its counterparts in the Balkans, can be squarely placed within the framework of a religious nationalist movement. As Fikret Adanir has argued, “[T]he dominance of ethnic nationalism should not lead us to underrate the importance of religion. More often than not religion dominated all other elements in Balkan nationalism. The wars of liberation during the nineteenth century were at the same time wars of religion ”<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Mark Mazower highlights the fact that with the advent of nationalism, “Religion became a marker of national identity in ways not known in the past, and therefore more sharply

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<sup>22</sup> Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Fikret Adanir, “The Formation of a ‘Muslim’ Nation in Bosnia Hercegovina: A Historiographic Discussion,” in *The Ottomans and the Balkans: A Discussion of Historiography*, ed. Suraiya Faroqhi and Fikret Adanir, Ottoman Empire and Its Heritage, v. 25 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2002), 303.

marked off from neighboring religions.”<sup>24</sup> In his excellent monograph, *Conversion and Apostasy in the Late Ottoman Empire*, Selim Deringil argues that not only did not religion fade away with advance of nationalism but it actually “becomes yoked to it through the process of conversion and apostacy.”<sup>25</sup> He has aptly described the nexus between nationalism and religion in late 19<sup>th</sup> century:

Yet when we come to the nineteenth century, religious identity is linked to national identity to such an extent that conversion to Islam and, after 1844 , potential conversion from Islam to Christianity were seen as a loss of identity, a harbinger of greater catastrophe, that is, potential de-nationalization. It was perceived not as an individually reprehensible act, but as an affront to the whole (more or less amorphously imagined) community, a deadly threat and an insult to a self-conscious group.<sup>26</sup>

From this perspective, Sultan Abdülhamid II’s policies in the frontier region of southeast Anatolia represented an attempt to recast his Kurdish subjects’ communal boundaries in a way that would align with his regime’s conception of Ottoman nationality. To counter the Armenian revolutionary movement and in order to bind the Kurds more firmly to the state, Abdülhamid II took his predecessors’ policies to a new level. He commissioned the establishment of the Hamidiye Light Cavalry Corps among the Kurdish tribes of the region, which was to serve as a sectarian communal barrier against the infiltration of Armenian armed bands into Ottoman territory from Iran and Russia. Abdülhamid and later the Unionists deployed the Hamidiye in their occupation of the northwest frontier region of Iran where the Hamidiye institution was replicated in the form of extending privileges to Iranian Kurds. Thus, the border populations became the subject of an intense imperial competition over protection of vulnerable porous frontiers as the significance of

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<sup>24</sup> Mark Mazower, *The Balkans* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000), 76.

<sup>25</sup> Selim Deringil, *Conversion and Apostasy in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 4.

<sup>26</sup> Deringil, 4.

the subjecthood and political loyalties of the overlapping populations of the frontiers impressed itself upon Ottoman, Iranian, and Russian elites. In short, Russia's proclaimed claims and efforts to protect the Orthodox Christians of the Ottoman Empire in order to advance its own imperial interests in the frontier zone were countered by similar Ottoman endeavors to gain advantages in the frontier disputes with Iran and Russia and to stave off Armenian raids through highlighting and promoting the sectarian identity of Sunni Kurds.

This study engages with Kurdish, Nestorian, Armenian, and Azeri histories across the Iranian-Ottoman frontiers in the hope to depart from the conventional focus on the Ottoman six provinces to intercommunal dynamics involving several communities on both sides of the Iranian-Ottoman frontiers. By doing so, it demonstrates the way intercommunal relations gradually changed over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in a process shaped by a multiplicity of local and international factors. It is suggested that sectarianism, which encompasses nationalism, emerged as a culture over a long period and was not inevitable or linear as studies on genocide have tended to assume. As Charles Tilly has demonstrated, contentious politics occur in a process that waxes and wanes depending on the availability of numerous opportunity structures.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, while the Ottoman *tanzimat* and Iran's similar centralization efforts led to significant changes in the organizational structures of local communities, it will be argued here that the internal developments within these communities also played integral roles in shaping modern sectarian identities that enabled intercommunal strife. Following Michael Reynolds' study of the Russo-Ottoman rivalry over frontier security, I argue that local communities took active part in the imperial rivalry through adopting the parameters within which imperial statesmen defined their polities, imperial security

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<sup>27</sup> Doug McAdam, Sidney G. Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

imperatives, and their respective borderland subjects. Furthermore, through examination of the process of communal change in different communities inhabiting the same frontier region, this study hopes to evade engagement with teleological nationalist narratives and the questions of justice and culpability in an exclusively Ottoman context.

To be more precise, this study seeks to analyze the evolution of intercommunal relations among the smaller communities of Nestorians and Kurds in the Ottoman province of Hakkari and the Iranian districts of Salmas, Urmia, and Solduz on its own terms since the 1830s. It shows the distinctive trajectory of conflict and coexistence among these communities against the larger imperial competition over frontier security and the subjecthood of the borderland populations between Iran, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia in which local actors took active part to shape their own destinies. The geographical scope consists of the Ottoman province of Hakkari, a sub-division of the *vilayet* of Van and the stretch of land west of Lake Urmia (running southward from Salmas to Savujbulagh), a district of the Iranian northwestern province of Azerbaijan. This frontier zone constituted a patch of disputed borderland that was inhabited by Sunni Kurdish *ashirets* and peasants, Nestorian *ashirets* and cultivators, Armenian villagers, and Shi'i Azeri landlords, governing elites, and their subjects.

#### **HISTORIOGRAPHY AND FIELDS OF INTERVENTION:**

As identified by Brad R. Dennis, historiography on late Ottoman East Anatolia falls generally within two frames of understanding: modernist and structuralist. According to Dennis, both variants of the historiographical tradition have, in one form or another, focused on the questions of culpability and justice.<sup>28</sup> As stated above, the modernist literature, rooted in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century modernization discourse, viewed the

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<sup>28</sup> Dennis, "Explaining Coexistence and Conflict in Eastern Anatolia, 1800-1878," 4-15.



Ottoman Empire and Qajar Iran as oriental Islamic despotisms inherently incapable of reform. Within this discourse, the West emerged as the source of a morally superior Christian civilization while the Ottoman Empire represented a degraded Eastern Islamic culture that retained dominance over large Christian communities through coercion.<sup>29</sup>

As European great powers established a semi-colonial dominance over the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Iran, treatment of Christian communities under Muslim rule became the yardsticks for these state's progress and modernization. In the process, religion became "the site of a colonial encounter between a self-styled "Christian" West and what it saw as its perennial adversary, an "Islamic Ottoman Empire."<sup>30</sup> From the modernist perspective, the Ottoman elite's rootedness in an Islamic and Turkish military culture rendered them incapable of dealing justly with their Christian minorities. The modernists viewed even the *millet* system and the *tanzimat* reforms as merely stratagems deployed by the Ottoman elite to retard the minorities' socio-political progress. The upshot was that, since Islam as a religion was deemed inherently resistant to reform and the Ottoman ruling classes failed to free themselves from this Islamic legacy, Western intervention on behalf of the minorities was necessary and morally justifiable. Not surprisingly, British reluctance to intervene on behalf of Armenians in the 1890s was labeled as the moral failure of an enlightened West.<sup>31</sup>

The structuralists posited that the Ottoman Empire was, by and large, benevolent towards its religious minorities and the *millet* system attested to this. This outlook, which gained popularity in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, built upon both the Ottoman defense narrative

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<sup>29</sup> Makdisi, "Fantasies of the Possible," 20.

<sup>30</sup> Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism*, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Dennis, "Explaining Coexistence and Conflict in Eastern Anatolia, 1800-1878," 8-9. See also Richard Hovannisian, *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times, Foreign dominion to statehood: the fifteenth century to the twentieth century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 2: 220.

and Immanuel Wallerstein's worlds-system theory. From the structuralist perspective, a weakened Ottoman Empire desperately sought to reestablish control and security over its vulnerable frontiers. However, since the empire had gradually become an economic periphery in a European-dominated world-system and functioned as an extension of great power politics, it largely failed in its efforts to contain violence between religious communities. This is while its Christian minorities had become tools in the hands of the great powers for extension of their colonial domination. In other words, Ottoman endeavors to re-establish security over a progressively polarized society floundered on account of great power intervention on behalf of the empire's minorities. As a result of such conflicting communal orientations and imperial visions, Christian communities turned into internal threats to the survival of the Ottoman Empire. As such, their massacre was a foregone conclusion.<sup>32</sup>

Both the modernist and the structuralist frames of understanding of conflict in late Ottoman East Anatolia suffer from limitations as they either tend to hold the Ottoman state entirely responsible for collective violence or depict the minorities as culprits for becoming pawns in the great power politics. The modernists charge the Ottoman state with being the sole responsible party for the large-scale intercommunal violence, thereby divesting the locals from having any agency. On the other hand, in the structuralist historiographical narratives, the minorities' provocations are identified as the main source for the Muslim majority's backlash. In the face of the rising tensions, the Ottoman state appears incapable of containing collective violence despite its good intentions as great power intervention undermined the little control it could exert and maintain over East

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<sup>32</sup> See Hilmar Kaiser's *Imperialism, racism, and development theories: the construction of a dominant paradigm on Ottoman Armenians* (Ann Arbor, Mich. Gomidas Inst., 1997) for a detailed study of how Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems analysis has served to justify Ottoman defense narratives' depiction of the Armenian communities of Anatolia as the primary sources of provocation for the Ottoman state's repressive measures.

Anatolia.<sup>33</sup> In short, such approaches leave the nuanced factors going into the long process of social cohesion and erosion understudied.<sup>34</sup> Their exclusive focus on the Ottoman Armenian and Assyrian communities also leaves much space for speculation as the history of the communities straddling the frontiers with Iran and the roles played by Russia and Iran are left out of the discussion.

Another closely related prevalent framework for the scholarship on late Ottoman East Anatolia has been that of nationalism. In a similar fashion to the narratives informed by questions of culpability and justice, the nationalist historiography on the region also consists of two general frames of understanding: official state nationalism versus minority nationalism. In the historiography on official state nationalism, the origins of Turkish nationalism are traced back to the Young Turk era when the Ottoman statesmen reluctantly decided to centralize control of the empire under the leadership of ethnic Turks. From this perspective, “due to the multiethnic character of the Empire, the Ottoman ruling elite was unable to offer a stable national identity.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, as Kamal Soleimani has argued, the thesis of latent Turkish nationalism, popularized by Bernard Lewis’ 1961 *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, continues to be applied by both Turkish nationalist apologists and the more recent historiography that seeks to deconstruct this official nationalism.<sup>36</sup> In the majority of the accounts on the emergence of modern Turkey, nationalism is seen as an initially reluctant and later conscious effort by the Ottoman elite to preserve the integrity of the empire. They posit that after the nebulous notion of Ottoman citizenship failed to achieve its end in restoring exclusive legitimacy

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<sup>33</sup> Stephen Duguid, “The Politics of Unity: Hamidian Policy in Eastern Anatolia,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 9, no. 2 (1973): 140–43.

<sup>34</sup> Dennis, “Explaining Coexistence and Conflict in Eastern Anatolia, 1800-1878,” 13–15.

<sup>35</sup> Akçam, *From Empire to Republic*, 52.

<sup>36</sup> Kamal Soleimani, *Islam and Competing Nationalisms in the Middle East, 1876-1926* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 74–75.

to the central government in Istanbul, a Muslim nationalist movement developed under Abdulhamid II. Having proven equally ineffective in saving the imperial domains from further truncation, the conservative Hamidian policies were cast aside in favor of the Young Turks' overtly Turkish nationalist ideology.<sup>37</sup> Subsequently, out of the military defeat of the CUP leaders during World War I and the subjugation of the empire by Western powers emerged a more vigorous nationalist movement under Mustafa Kemal. Carrying the expressly nationalist title of Atatürk, Mustafa Kemal presided over the inauguration and consolidation of a Westward-looking secular Turkish Republic.<sup>38</sup>

This official nationalist narrative is concerned with the genealogy of the Turkish Republic, in which focus remains on the evolution of state institutions and the notion of Ottomanism and its mutation into official Turkish nationalism. Within this narrative, the state is largely exonerated from blame for the mistreatment of the empire's minorities. Instead, the great powers are charged with full culpability for the atrocities as they incited the minorities to revolt. Thus, the question of minorities, and the Ottoman elites' decimation of whole populations, are explained as tragic but necessary responses for the preservation of the state.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> For different views on the periodization of Turkish nationalism, see M. Şükrü Hanioglu, 'Turkism and the Young Turks, 1889-1908', in Hans-Lukas Kieser (ed.), *Turkey Beyond Nationalism: Towards Post-Nationalist Identities* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2006), 3-19; Erik-Jan Zürcher, 'Young Turks, Ottoman Muslims and Turkish Nationalists: Identity Politics 1908-1938', in Kemal H. Karpat (ed.), *Ottoman Past and Today's Turkey* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 150-79.

<sup>38</sup> For more conventional historiography of the rise of Turkish nationalism see, Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961); Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); Stanford Shaw, *From Empire to Republic: The Turkish War of National Liberation*, 5 vols. (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2000); Stanford Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, vol. II, *Reform, Revolution, and Republic: The Rise of Modern Turkey, 1808-1975* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

<sup>39</sup> See Fatma Müge Göçek, 'Reconstructing the Turkish Historiography on the Armenian Massacres and Deaths of 1915', in Richard G. Hovannisian (ed.), *Looking backward, moving forward: confronting the Armenian Genocide* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 220. In her article, Göçek divides the Turkish historiographical narratives into three variants: The Ottoman investigative narrative, the Republican defensive narrative, and the post-nationalist critical narrative.

The historiography on ‘sub’-nationalisms similarly locates the origins of minorities’ nationalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century *tanzimat* era during which increased contact with the west, along with Ottoman institutional reforms, caused a large degree of socioeconomic dislocations. The argument is that as the primary beneficiaries of the opening of Ottoman markets to global trade, that the Christian minorities’ economic conditions improved. In the process, minority elites either framed their communities’ grievances in explicitly nationalistic terms or helped inaugurate a cultural revival.<sup>40</sup> The national idea later spread to the elites of the Muslim majority Arabs and Kurds as the policies of the Committee for Union and Progress trended increasingly towards pan-Turkism.<sup>41</sup> The CUP’s unequivocal subscription to pan-Turkism alienated different Muslim nationalities such as Arabs, Albanians, and Kurds, leading to the emergence of provincial nationalisms. Thus, nationalism, in both its statist and subaltern forms, is said to have constituted the primary cause for the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the break-down of intercommunal relations. In the process, intercommunal conflict is explained to have increased as minority and state nationalisms collided.

In light of the foregoing, it is safe to conclude that nationalism as a framework for organizing scholarship, rooted as it is in partisanship, has largely failed to provide an appropriate lens for the study of intercommunal dynamics in the long 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, continued suppression of Kurdish identity and Turkey’s denial of the Armenian Genocide explains the continued predominance of such approaches. Consequently, few, if any, studies have given due attention to the integration of scholarship on Kurdish, Armenian, and Assyrian communities with a focus on parallel internal communal

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<sup>40</sup> See Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World*; Philip S Khoury, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism: The Politics of Damascus, 1860-1920* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>41</sup> Khoury, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism*, 67–74.

changes, contending visions of the Ottoman reforms, the contentious Ottoman-Iranian frontier demarcation process, and the question of imperial frontier security and the politics of subjecthood as factors in causing and escalating conflict.

Only in recent times have a number of studies shifted the focus to the question of the Ottoman-Iranian border demarcation and Russo-Ottoman rivalry over frontier security as the primary lens through which to explain the dramatic increase in intercommunal conflict following the dissolution of the Kurdish emirates in the 1830s and 1840s. Yet rarely has any attempt been made to study intercommunal relations in the region through the lens of sectarianism or communalism (as an overarching conceptual framework that explains the creation and the clash of divergent communal visions) that have long dominated the historiography on the Levant and India, respectively. In an attempt to integrate the isolated histories of the communities of southeast Anatolia and northwest Iran, this dissertation seeks to use the scholarship on the Levant, India, and the Balkans to shift the focus to the gradual entrenchment of what Ussama Makdisi has dubbed the culture of sectarianism.

#### **THE SCOPE OF RESEARCH AND ARGUMENTS:**

Drawing on Ussama Makdisi's seminal book on sectarianism and the studies conducted by Michael Reynolds and Sabri Ateş on the questions of imperial frontier security and border delimitation, respectively, this dissertation argues that local communities in Hakkari and Urmia gradually adopted the parameters and ideological frameworks applied by rival empires in their struggle for reestablishing or extending sovereignty to the Ottoman-Iranian frontier populations. To put it differently, local communities gradually assimilated the sectarian idiom deployed by their rival imperial and foreign missionary patrons to recast the concerned groups' communal boundaries and

aspirations. Competing imperial states sought to rejuvenate or establish control and security structures along their frontiers through capitalizing on the border-landers' religious and ethnic identities. Over time, such contestations over cultivation of the borderlanders' loyalties to imperial centers gave rise to a new understanding of religion as the basis for staking political claims. Defined in this sense, this is how this study uses the term, sectarianism.

In his seminal book, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon*, Ussama Makdisi argues that sectarianism (which he defines as mobilization of religious identities for political and social purposes) developed in the context of contested Ottoman reforms. He maintains that European diplomats and missionaries, Ottoman statesmen, and local communities all participated in developing different visions of the reform process which led to the re-definition of communal boundaries in Mount Lebanon along sectarian lines. He suggests that religion became the site of a colonial encounter in the Ottoman domains, whereby Europeans defined notions of progress and reform within a religious framework. In other words, positing Islam as the problem and the solution as European Christian rationality, the Europeans measured Ottoman modernization by the yardstick of the empire's treatment of its religious minorities. This conception of reforms clashed with the Ottoman state's notion of reforms. The Ottoman elite saw the reforms as a means of centralizing control over the periphery in order to resuscitate a modernized but hierarchical Islamic state. Amidst these differing notions of reform, different religious communities of Mount Lebanon and southeast Anatolia in their own right contested the meaning of imperial reforms by articulating distinctive interpretations of "the historical past to justify present

claims and future development.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, sectarianism in both locales emerged at the nexus of European and Russian colonialism and Ottoman imperialism. Makdisi has aptly described the intricate process of the construction of sectarian identities and politics in the following terms:

Within this space, sectarianism at both an elite and popular level attempted to fuse the ideologies of European nationalism and a political Christendom with local conceptions of social order. Sectarian violence was symptomatic of the failure of this attempt; it occurred precisely at the interstices of this incomplete fusion, in which the old anchors of a non-sectarian elitist society partially gave way to reworked traditions and new ideas of bounded and exclusionary national religious communities.<sup>43</sup>

The argument that contestation over the meaning of imperial reforms by colonial, imperial, and local actors simultaneously led to the emergence of sectarian politics as a medium through which to redefine communal boundaries in Mount Lebanon underlies the investigative approach in this study. However, unlike in Mount Lebanon, where imperial powers could and did intervene on behalf of the Maronite community, across the vast expanse of southeastern Anatolia, such intervention was bound to be contentious, tenuous, intermittent, and largely tied to the imperatives of imperial frontier security and the politics of defining and determining subjecthood. The extensive mountainous topography of southeast Anatolia constituted a closed frontier zone between a Sunni Ottoman Empire, a Shi'i Qajar monarchy, and a Christian imperial Russia that were locked in a contest over frontier security and the contentious process of Ottoman-Iranian boundary-making.

Concerns over frontier security brought empires to the margins with grave consequences for the border populations and their changing conceptions of communal

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<sup>42</sup> Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism*, 7.

<sup>43</sup> Makdisi, “Fantasies of the Possible,” 26.



boundaries. Sabri Ateş has masterfully shown the impact of the boundary-making on the frontier communities. He argues that during the process of frontier delimitation, which transformed “the relationship between center and periphery from one of suzerainty to one of sovereignty [...], the borderland communities struggled with enormous ambiguities as they were made to choose, if not a nationality, then a state subjecthood”<sup>44</sup> The boundary-making efforts, part and parcel of the expansion of state capacity into the periphery, necessarily altered the socio-political structure of the border communities. In the process, “contradictory forces swirled around the peoples of the frontier, impinging on their loyalties and collective sense of self.”<sup>45</sup>

Amidst the contentious process of border-demarcation, which was exacerbated by continued Russian aggression, the Ottoman and Iranian states contested the subjecthood status of their overlapping populations. The Ottomans and Iranians sought to revitalize their diminished sovereignty at their frontiers through binding their overlapping populations to the center in the form of laws and regulations and by accentuating their sectarian affiliations. Will Hanley has rightly asserted that,

From criminal law in eighteenth-century Istanbul to sectarianism in Tanzimat Lebanon to municipal development in mid-nineteenth-century Izmir, it is clear that top-down reform projects suggested communitarian frames for populations, and individuals and groups responded in the same idiom by adopting those frames.<sup>46</sup>

However, as suggested above, since Ottoman sovereignty in the margins was continuously contested, an emphasis on Sunni identity set the stage for the emergence of sectarian dynamics, leading to a gradual shift away from traditional socio-political

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<sup>44</sup> Sabri Ateş, *The Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands: Making a Boundary, 1843-1914* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 319.

<sup>45</sup> Ateş, 317.

<sup>46</sup> Will Hanley, *Identifying with Nationality, Europeans, Ottomans, and Egyptians in Alexandria* (Berlin, Boston: Columbia University Press, 2017), 3.

hierarchies to making communal representations through the medium of religion. Thus, it was not so much that imperial forces of alteration and destruction unsettled the borderlanders' long-standing patterns of life without replacing them with viable mechanisms of conflict resolution, as Ateş has argued.<sup>47</sup> Rather, it should be emphasized that rival empires actively invested in the sectarian identity of the frontier subjects in order to strengthen their allegiances. They highlighted these sectarian identities by offering the Sunni Kurds a series of incentives in opposition to their Christian and Shi'i neighbors who were the beneficiaries of patronage of the Qajar state, the great powers, and foreign missions. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, anxieties over frontier security led the Ottoman government to institutionalize the Kurdish tribes' sectarianized identity through the formation of the Hamidiye regiments that gave the Kurds latitude to use violence against Armenian armed bands and peaceful peasants in East Anatolia and northwest Iran. With the Ottoman occupation of northwest Iran, the Hamidiye institution was duplicated in the form of a regime of incentives to the Iranian Kurdish tribes so that they would advance and entrench the new Ottoman order in the occupied territories through displacing and subjugating Shi'is and Nestorians.

Similarly, Michael Reynolds' study offers a constructive framework for the examination of conflict in the final phase of Ottoman and Russian imperial rule in East Anatolia and the Caucasus. He argues that "interstate competition, and not nationalism, provides the key to understanding the course of history in the Ottoman-Russian borderlands in the early twentieth century."<sup>48</sup> Within the emergent global order dominated by interstate competition, nationalism, Reynolds asserts, was as much the

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<sup>47</sup> Ateş, *The Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands*, 2013, 5.

<sup>48</sup> Michael A. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908-1918* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 6.

consequence as it was the cause of the shattering of the imperial order.<sup>49</sup> His study situates the configuration of power relations in the Ottoman-Russian frontier zone within its imperial context in which empires functioned as state actors locked in competition over the security of their vulnerable multiethnic frontiers.

Reynolds posits that imperial Russian and Ottoman states faced a grave dilemma in the face of the rise of nationalism as the primary organizing principle of governance in the West. As the sheer logic of the European states' military superiority ensured the spreading of nationalism to the rest of the world, ethnicity progressively provided the theoretical claim to sovereignty. In the process, traditional diplomacy gave way to population politics which called for clearly demarcated borders "to replace the older and vaguer notion of frontiers."<sup>50</sup> The proliferation of the national idea from Europe and the necessity to have precisely delimited borders correspond to sovereign nation-states first affected the Balkan provinces of the Ottoman Empire due to their proximity to the sources of European power and ideas. Subsequently, rebellions in the Balkans were interpreted as national liberation struggles as Europeans began to see the rest of the world in their own image, i.e. on the basis of popular sovereignty. Against this predominant notion of politics, Ottoman *tanzimat* reforms could accomplish little to check European intervention on behalf of the Balkan peoples. This is not to say, as Reynold argues, that the imperial subjects' grievances were not real:

Rather, it is to observe that the way these revolts culminated in the establishment of nation-states owes more to exogenous factors such as great power intervention and the available model of sovereign statehood than it does to the endogenous social structures and political agendas of the new "nations" themselves.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Reynolds, 9.

<sup>50</sup> Reynolds, 13.

<sup>51</sup> Reynolds, 13.

At the Congress of Berlin (1878), the great powers' recognition of the independence of Montenegro, Serbia, and Romania demonstrated the legitimacy of ethnicity as *the* principle for political organization and sovereignty. The efforts to curb Russia's excessive gains and to manage the Eastern Question inadvertently manifested in the form of acknowledging the national idea "as a principle around which the powers organized their competition."<sup>52</sup> The recognition of ethnicity as the legitimate source of claiming political sovereignty created the dilemma of what to do with those ethnoreligious groups that were too small or scattered across imperial frontiers to attain statehood. Reflecting the preoccupation with the idea of popular sovereignty, the great powers took steps in demanding protection for such groups as Armenians, who were now considered a 'minority'.

This outside pressure, which arguably undermined the Armenian cause, coupled with the Ottoman state's efforts to reestablish control over the frontier zone, unsettled the long-established power relations in the region. "The affirmation of the nation-state by the great powers as the normative unit of global politics exerted a tremendous impact upon local politics already in turmoil."<sup>53</sup> The introduction of the ethnic idea as the basis for territorial sovereignty added a new dimension to the plight of the Christian groups of Anatolia as they came to be perceived by the Muslim majority and the Ottoman statesmen as rivals and internal threats to the empire's survival, respectively. As such, nationalism in the Russo-Ottoman borderlands in the last decade of the long 19<sup>th</sup> century, Reynolds concludes, "is better seen as a byproduct of interstate competition than as the stimulus of that competition."<sup>54</sup> In other words, the local communities such as Kurds and

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<sup>52</sup> Reynolds, 14.

<sup>53</sup> Reynolds, 18.

<sup>54</sup> Reynolds, 18.

Armenians staked their claims within the nationalist framework as this was how the great powers saw and framed conflict.

Michael Reynolds' argument is more applicable to the Armenian case as the trajectory of the development of Armenian national consciousness was aided by different factors such as their integration within the more industrially developed Russian Caucasus, their educated émigré population in Europe and America, and their access to an extensive network of foreign missions' educational and medical facilities, their experience with church reforms, and their trade ties with Europeans. However, as it was argued above, the Kurds did not consistently frame their conflict in explicit nationalist terms as they were tribally organized and were far from being able to imagine themselves as a unified and coherent community and even if they did, they had no means of propagating it or selling it to the great powers. This task fell to the Ottomans who invested in their sectarianizing their identity as opposed to great power-supported Christian claims to national sovereignty. Moreover, the Kurdish tribes' communal boundaries were gradually recast as an explicitly sectarian community as a result of the rise of a revived Naqshbandi movement. This religious revivalism, which was matched by the foreign missions' recasting of religion as a national and political marker of identity, manifested in the invasion of a Shi'i Iran and the framing of Kurdish grievances in sectarian terms. Furthermore, Sheikh Ubeydullah's religious movement was preceded by decades of Ottoman efforts to invest the Kurdish tribes' identity with a sectarian ethos in order to make them more loyal to the Ottoman state in the face of Iranian Shi'i encroachments and its Russian backed irredentism in the border region.

Reynolds' thesis about the adoption of the national idea by locals, after it was created as a blueprint and bandied about in diplomatic circles, is based on a handful of cases, and thus fails to make for a cogent argument. Also, Talal Assad, Adam Becker,

and Selim Deringil have complicated our understanding of the concepts of secularism, religion, and nationalism. They have argued that both secularism and religion came about “within and as part of modernity” in a process of “religionization,” i.e., through the naming of religion and constructing it anachronistically as a category in opposition to secularism. In this respect Talal Asad notes:

To insist that nationalism should be seen as religion, or even as having been “shaped” by religion is, in my view, to miss the nature and consequence of the revolution brought about by modern doctrines and practices of the secular in the structure of collective representations. Of course modern nationalism draws on preexisting languages and practices— including those that we call, anachronistically, “religious.” How could it be otherwise? Yet it doesn’t follow from this that religion forms nationalism.<sup>55</sup>

Adam Becker has applied Asad’s evacuation thesis to chart the formation of Assyrian nationalism through the American missionary encounter in Qajar Urmia. Becker argues that both nationalism and religion actually emerged simultaneously and “often help to constitute each other in their differences. To be sure, in the development of nationalism among the East Syrians, certain parts of the ecclesial tradition were renegotiated and mediated into the developing nation. However, the Christianity itself of the East Syrians changed in this process of translation.”<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, the proliferation of missions and the growth of sectarianism among Christian groups of the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Iran led to an increased awareness of the distinctiveness of national identities in the region as the concept of *millet* changed from signifying a religious community to a national one.<sup>57</sup> But this shift did not mean that religion was dispelled for

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<sup>55</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 194.

<sup>56</sup> Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, 24.

<sup>57</sup> Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, eds., *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society*, vol. 1, 2 vols. (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1982).

nationalism to take its place. The two concepts, modern constructs, changed in the process of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and complemented one another in their differences.<sup>58</sup>

Combining the theoretical approaches adopted in these studies, this dissertation situates the evolution of sectarian conflict within its right context of imperial competition over frontier security. Against the backdrop, the local communities of Hakkari and Urmia developed diverging responses in attempts to redefine their communal boundaries in a world of competing ideologies and imperial rivalries. The Kurdish and Nestorian tribes of Hakkari and Urmia were pulled into this rivalry and chose varied responses at different times in accordance with the opportunity structures available to them. In the wake of the demise of Kurdish dynastic power, a religious class of Naqshbandi *tariqa* sheikhs rose to the challenge of diminished security in the frontier zone and the Ottoman state's endeavors to promote an official state religion.<sup>59</sup>

The early manifestation of a vigorous attempt to redefine communal boundaries based on a localized religious and national identity emerged in 1880 with the revolt of Sheikh Ubeydullah of Nehri. This renowned Kurdish Naqshbandi leader located the distinctiveness of the Kurdish identity in the Kurdish community's firm adherence to the laws of the sharia as articulated in the teachings of his predecessor, Mawlana Khalid of Shehrizur. Ubeydullah appropriated the prevalent discourse of the national idea to unite the Kurdish tribes in Hakkari and Urmia for the project of establishing an independent Kurdish religious-national community. Although his project ultimately floundered, its emergence as a potent source of Kurdish tribal unity on the basis of a revivalist Islamic movement represented a watershed in the evolution of intercommunal dynamics in the region.

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<sup>58</sup> Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, 12–14.

<sup>59</sup> Soleimani, *Islam and Competing Nationalisms in the Middle East, 1876-1926*, 157.

The Nestorian communities of Hakkari and Urmia similarly developed a sense of national consciousness through the process of cultural and religious revival which was stimulated by the American missionaries' evangelical activities in Urmia. As Adam Becker has shown, the American missionaries' evangelical efforts in promoting modern ideas of a "true religion" through a pervasive religious revival ultimately created the conditions for the emergence and development of national affect and consciousness.<sup>60</sup> He also notes that "the intensification and proliferation of missionary work in the late nineteenth century created a pluralism in which a secularized national discourse further emerged."<sup>61</sup> As the multiplicity of missions in Urmia aided the process of sacralization of the 'Assyrian' nation, at the same time, it also pushed the Nestorian communities further towards political mobilization within the Russian imperial orbit. The upshot was the polarization of ethno-religious communities, which were reconstituted on the basis of politicized religious identities, as they became identified with the imperial states competing over frontier security.

As the frontier disputes gained momentum in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman and Russian states occupied the northwestern frontier region of Iran in order to create security buffer zones against one another. In the process, both imperial states capitalized on the religious identity of the frontier populations in order to secure their loyalties. Amidst such contestation over the boundary question, the local communities staked their claims on a range of ethnic and religious terms, altering them in accordance with the contingencies embedded in power relations. The collision of imperial interests, advanced through the medium of the local communities, combined with the outburst of revolutionary ideologies and political and tribal violence confronted the frontier

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<sup>60</sup> Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, 135.

<sup>61</sup> Becker, 257.



populations with ambiguous choices as they were pulled in different directions. Such alternate imperial power relations and varied articulations of diverging communal visions often led to violent frictions between the Kurdish and Nestorian tribes. Frequent missionary, Ottoman and great power interventions only further escalated socio-economic tensions, pushing them into a fully-fledged sectarian warfare during World War I.

#### **OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS:**

Chapter one lays the ground for the main argument pursued in this study that sectarian tensions escalated in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the process of the Iranian-Ottoman boundary making and continued Russian aggression coupled with the *tanzimat* reforms and Muslim and Christian missionary evangelization efforts began to create diverging communal visions among Armenian, Nestorian, and Kurdish communities. The chapter discusses the initial conflict between Kurdish tribes and the mountain Nestorians of Hakkari in 1843 in the context of Iranian and Ottoman centralization efforts. Situating the conflict, which resulted in a large-scale massacre of the mountain Nestorians of Hakkari, within the context of Ottoman and Iranian efforts to expand central control in their frontier zones, it argues that the conflict resulted from a dynastic struggle in the Hakkari emirate in which both Christians and Kurds took part. In other words, it contends that the massacres were not sparked by sectarian differences but occurred as a result of the Kurdish dynasts' struggle to preserve their declining political autonomy.

The second chapter investigates the general internal developments within the Kurdish, Nestorian, and Armenian communities of Hakkari and Urmia and the impact such developments left on intercommunal dynamics in the wake of the Russo-Ottoman

war of 1877-78. Largely focused on Sheikh Ubeydullah's revolt against the Iranian state, the chapter argues that Sheikh Ubeydullah's campaigns stemmed from the sheikh's conscious effort to recast the boundaries of the Kurdish community on a national notion that was firmly grounded in a sectarian understanding of the world. Ubeydullah's conception of a distinctly Kurdish religion, which was anchored in the Naqshbandi revivalist thought, represented an attempt at creating a new sectarian order. The chapter argues that the Kurdish leader's vision of a sectarian communal order emerged at the nexus of the Ottoman and Iranian states' endeavors to subsume the imperial periphery within their centralizing states with their state-sponsored versions of Islam. Moreover, his movement unfolded in defiance of emerging competing visions within the Armenian and Nestorian communities that were aid by Christian great powers. The chapter concludes by arguing that the indiscriminate punishment of Ubeydullah's Sunni Kurdish followers by the Iranian state engendered a new but unstable sectarian boundary between the Kurdish tribes of northwest Iran and the Shi'i subjects and ruling elites of Azerbaijan.

Chapter three examines the impact of Armenian revolutionary raids against the Ottoman state and its frontier Kurdish tribes in the Van province from Iranian territory in the 1890s. It will also investigate the impact the establishment of the Hamidiye Cavalry Corps left on the identity and the socio-political structure of Kurdish tribes of Iran, especially that of the Shikak confederation. The chapter situates the conflict among Kurds, Nestorians, and Armenians within the context of Russo-Ottoman competition for imperial frontier security as the Shi'i population of the Iranian province of Azerbaijan undergoes a period of popular mobilization against despotic governance and increasing foreign commercial and political domination of Iran. The Armeno-Kurdish conflict along and across the northwest frontiers of Azerbaijan with the Ottoman Empire is examined as part of the larger process of imperial struggle for control of overlapping border

populations as these same populations undergo drastic changes in their attempts to recast their communal boundaries and place in the emergent global interstate system characterized by distinct boundaries.

The fourth chapter discusses the assassination of an American missionary by a coalition of Shi'is and Kurds within the context of an emergent Iranian religious nationalist movement and the Ottoman occupation of the northwest frontiers of Azerbaijan through the intermediary role of Sunni Kurdish tribes. It is argued that the advent of the Russian Orthodox mission at the turn of the twentieth century created a backlash from the Muslim population of the borderland against the perceived aggressiveness of the American missionaries' representations on behalf of their Nestorian clients. The attempts by the Qajar crown prince in Tabriz to create a similar personal guards on the model of the Hamidiye regiments in the Ottoman Empire pitted the Kurdish tribes of Begzadeh against American missionaries and their Nestorian clients and Afshar landlords as the Ottoman encroachments widened the schism between a revolutionary coalition of Shi'i Azeris and Armenians against the Ottoman-backed Sunni Kurds. In other words, as the Iranian revolution burst onto the scene in Azerbaijan, the conflict between the Sunni Kurdish tribes and the Nestorians morphed into a larger one featuring Iranian Azeri nationalists supported by the Armenian and Nestorian communities and their missionary patrons.

The final chapter studies the changing contours of intercommunal dynamics under the strain of the occupation of northwest Azerbaijan by both Ottoman and Russian imperial states from 1908 up through 1914. The argument is that intercommunal relations were closely intertwined with and affected by imperial policies that focused on cultivating ties between the intrusive states and the subjects of borderland. In this respect, particular attention is paid to the study of patterns of land ownership and land-grabbing

schemes under the occupation regimes as sources of extension and entrenchment of the transplanted imperial order. It is further argued that while the Ottoman encroachments in Azerbaijan proceeded on the backbone of Sunni Kurdish support, the subsequent Russian policy also favored the Nestorians and select Kurdish tribes and personalities to destabilize the Ottoman order in East Anatolia. The end result was enforcement of seemingly contradictory imperial policies across the borderlands by both the Ottoman and Russian regimes, ultimately leading to the politicization of Kurdish ethnic identity specifically in opposition to that of the Armenians and Nestorians. In other words, the Russian occupiers continued the Ottoman policy of investing the Kurdish tribes' distinctive sectarian identity against their Christian neighbors, which eventually forced the Ottomans to abandon their pro-Armenian policy and to fall back on their old policy of highlighting their sectarian bond with the Kurdish tribes of East Anatolia and northwest Iran. This set the stage for the massacres that devastated the populations of the region on a massive scale.

## **Chapter 1: Imperial Reforms, Foreign Missionaries, and the First Kurdish-Nestorian Conflict**

During the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman elite undertook to centralize control in the outlying provinces of the empire primarily to stave off the territorial hemorrhage that had begun since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. To meet this urgent need, a series of policies and practices, which later became collectively known as the *tanzimat*, were adopted to haul the imperial *ancien regime* into the emergent global interstate system emanating from Europe. A crucial component of these reforms consisted of converting the vaguely defined frontiers of the empire into clearly demarcated boundaries. To accomplish this imperative goal, the loyalties of the frontier populations needed to definitively come under the purview of the centralizing state. Thus, the process of territorializing imperial domains, constitutive of making the modern state, went in tandem with incorporating the frontier populations into the body politic.

For the Ottomans, coping with the changing circumstances in a globalizing world of territorialized political structures began with instituting a new set of codes including an overarching Ottoman citizenship, regularized taxation, and universal conscription. While the regular taxation drive to power the military was vigorously pursued, the question of forging Ottoman citizenship remained on the back burner. The outcome of such pervasive institutional laxity in the creation and entrenchment of a new imperial identity commensurate with the sultan's multi-ethnic and multi-confessional empire manifested early in the form of chronic intercommunal tensions between the empire's confessional communities.

Since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Christian subjects of the empire, as the primary beneficiaries of the rapidly expanding trade with Europe, had begun to climb the social ladder at an accelerated pace. This imbalanced amelioration of the socio-economic status

of Christian minority groups over their Muslim majority counterparts has often been claimed to have strained peaceful intercommunal dynamics. However, as Grehan has aptly demonstrated, the marked improvement in the economic prosperity of the Christian communities of the Levant was coterminous with, if not preceded by, another more important underlying source of mounting intercommunal tensions. The extended political crises shaking the Ottoman Empire in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and the early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries gradually caused sectarian tensions to build up. As such, the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century intercommunal atrocities in the Levant, known as the *hawadith*, represented a climax of a series of intercommunal frictions that had occurred as a result of the long and slow process of “disintegration of the early-modern political order.”<sup>62</sup>

The circumstances in southeastern Anatolia were in some ways similar and in many ways different from those characterizing the Levantine regions in the proximity of the Mediterranean Sea. Similarities ranged from foreign missionary and commercial interests in the region to foreign imperial aggression. The differences, however, primarily associated with the prevailing socio-political structures and the geostrategic nature of southeastern Anatolia as an exposed frontier zone, created a more unique set of challenges for the Ottoman government.

To begin with, foreign contact with the indigenous Christian population was delayed until the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century after Russia had wrested control of the Caucasus. Secondly, the region was characterized by a rough mountainous terrain that had long served as a political backwater and a vaguely defined frontier zone separating a Shi'i domain from a Sunni polity. The geographic inaccessibility of the region, which was located far from sea traffic and the prospering maritime commerce of Europe,

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<sup>62</sup> James Grehan, “Imperial Crisis and Muslim-Christian Relations in Ottoman Syria and Palestine, c. 1770-1830,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 58, no. 4 (July 9, 2015): 490, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685209-12341381>.

stunted the possibility of large economic enterprises that had so often attracted European imperial interest elsewhere. With Russian penetration of the Caucasus, the region had assumed an increased strategic significance as a springboard for Russia's pursuit of an aggressive expansionist policy in Ottoman and Iranian territories under the pretext of protecting Orthodox Christians. Thirdly, a mixed array of Christian and Muslim communities populated this frontier zone's remote river valleys and mountain hideouts in a variety of demographic patterns and lifestyles. The more numerous nomadic Kurdish tribes and small pockets of Nestorian communities pursued pastoralism while Armenian Christians dominated the widespread small urban centers and the wider agricultural lands of the plains. Fourthly, a set of Kurdish noble families had carved out pockets of control along the Iranian-Ottoman frontier, maintaining a precarious autonomous existence by keeping numerous Kurdish tribes in check even.

Nevertheless, despite the predominantly integrative practices and lifestyles across cultural, economic, and political spheres, which buttressed the upkeep of a tolerable coexistence, during the *tanzimat*, intercommunal dynamics broke down in an abrupt manner. A variety of causes accounted for such an implosion. The Ottoman military campaigns in the region shattered the established political structure of the semi-independent Kurdish dynasties. The result was the atomization of the regional socio-political structure, thus unleashing the fissiparous forces of a multiplicity of smaller tribes to jockey for control over recourses. This regressive political evolution, combined with the Ottoman state incapacity to enforce full central authority in southeastern Anatolia and Mesopotamia in the wake of the Crimean War (1853-56), portended disaster as the region descended into relentless conflict over scanty and underutilized resources among dwindled tribal formations. Imperial rivalry also made its adverse contribution in the creation of the right conditions for a sectarian conflagration by the century's end.

Continued Russian belligerence, spirited missionary evangelical activity, and the inauguration of the contentious process of making the boundary with Iran combined to make the developments within the local confessional communities ripe for the emergence of what Ussama Makdisi has termed the “culture of sectarianism.”<sup>63</sup> Tribal-based loyalties, constitutive of a secular political hierarchy, gave way to sectarian affiliation as the primary source of identification within the imperial structure.

This chapter will set the grounds for the following chapters by sketching the human and physical topography of the region along with the nature of the intercommunal dynamics binding the various Sunni, Shi'i, Christian, and Yezidi communities together prior to and during the crises triggered by the Ottoman state's attempts to centralize control in southeastern Anatolia and Mesopotamia. The scope of the chapter consists of the northwestern stretch of the Iranian-Ottoman frontier, covering a triangular mountainous terrain located between the plains and cities of Van, Urmia, and Mosul. This region was dominated by a number of autonomous Kurdish *beyliks* [area controlled by a *bey*/local ruler], which fiercely resisted the Ottoman military initiatives to re-establish Ottoman sovereignty throughout the 1830s and 1840s.

The Kurdish-Ottoman face-off during the 1830 and 1840s involved large scale massacres of both Kurds and non-Muslim religious groups such as the Yezidis and the Nestorians, leading historians to classify them as “sectarian dissonance”, mirroring and often foreshadowing “the events” in the Levant.<sup>64</sup> This chapter will closely investigate the Kurdish-Ottoman conflicts of the 1830s and 1840s with aim of identifying the causes underlying the conflicts that involved the slaughter of several thousand Nestorians of the Hakkari region. As such this chapter will serve as a preamble to the following ones where

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<sup>63</sup> Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism*.

<sup>64</sup> Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World*.



the issue of sectarianism as an endemic phenomenon will be critically examined. The current chapter undertakes to situate the initial violent clashes between the Kurds and their non-Muslim neighbors in the context of Ottoman endeavors to recentralize control, thus, distinguishing such conflicts as struggles for political survival. In other words, in this chapter, I will debunk the often-invoked argument that sectarian animosities constituted the primary driver of conflict between Kurds and Christians by focusing on the events of 1843.<sup>65</sup>

The process of reform in the Ottoman Empire had begun cautiously and reluctantly following a series of disastrous wars with Russia in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Mahmud II (r. 1808-1839) expedited his predecessor, Selim III's efforts by abolishing the Janissary Corps and establishing a new army modeled on European lines. Sultan Mahmud was urgently prompted to reform the military after the fiasco of the Greek Revolt (1820-30), another calamitous war with Russia in 1828-29, and the occupation of Syria by Mehmet Ali Pasha of Egypt in the 1830s. The Ottoman defeat at the Battle of Nizip against the insubordinate Egyptian governor's son, Ibrahim Pasha in 1839, compelled the new sultan, Abdülmecid I, to promulgate the decree of Hatt-ı Şerif-i Gülhane (the Rose Garden Noble Rescript) in 1839. As Abu Manneh has noted, the Rescript was deeply rooted in the Islamic tradition as it was inspired by the proliferation of the Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi ideals of abidance by the Sharia among the governing elite of Istanbul. Abu Manneh's study reveals that a great number of the palace officials echoed the Naqshbandi concerns that the late imperial decline stemmed from empire's negligence of Islamic governing practices. Despite such influences, during Sultan Mahmud II's reign, the focus remained on restoring sultanic powers, hence a sharp loss in

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<sup>65</sup> Hirmis Aboona, *Assyrians, Kurds, and Ottomans: Intercommunal Relations on the Periphery of the Ottoman Empire* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2008).

the legitimacy of the Ottomans government among its subjects. Thus, the content and intent behind the proclamation of the decree appears to have partially arisen from the urgent need to appease the alienated imperial constituency. Abu Manneh specifies that “with the promise of its high moral and legal ideals, [the decree] seems to have helped regaining the sympathy for Sultan Abdülmecid of many of those who were disillusioned by the acts and policies of his father, Sultan Mahmud II.”<sup>66</sup>

Predominant approach in the scholarship on the Ottoman *tanzimat* era, however, underscores the association of the Gülhane decree with the “European public opinion.”<sup>67</sup> It is often claimed that the decree, which declared parity among Muslims and Christians, was issued with the purpose of enlisting British support against the threat of the Egyptian army in occupation of Syria and with the hope that future Russian encroachments on confessional grounds would thus be stalled. In the 1820s and 1830s, Tsarist Russia had imposed a series of wars on the Ottomans and the Qajars on the pretext of protecting Orthodox Christian communities under Muslim rule. Much territory had been lost as a result, hacking at foundations of the Ottoman and Qajar states’ prestige as Muslim sovereigns. Thus, it was necessary for the Porte to heed the British government’s counsel in giving parity to its Christian subjects to stay further territorial hemorrhage to Russia’s aggressive policy of protecting the Orthodox Christians under the sultan’s rule.

#### **THE INITIATIVES TO MAKE THE BOUNDARY:**

Prior to the official inauguration of the *tanzimat* reforms in 1839, the question of making the boundaries came to the fore on the heels of the latest in a series of frontier

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<sup>66</sup> Butrus Abu-Manneh, “The Islamic Roots of the Gülhane Rescript,” *Die Welt Des Islams* 34, no. 2 (1994): 201–2.

<sup>67</sup> Roderic H Davison, *Reform in the Ottoman Empire, 1956-1876* (New York: Gordian Press, 1973), 54.

wars between the Iranian Qajar monarchy and the Ottoman Empire. The 1821-23 Iranian-Ottoman war, like the previous one in 1808, originated over dynastic succession disputes of the Kurdish *beylik* of Baban in Shahrezur and the indeterminate status of the Kurdish nomadic tribes of Haydaranli and Sipki roaming the northernmost borders around Bayezid and Maku. The war was sparked by the submission of the *bey* of Suleimanieh, Mahmud Pasha, to the Qajar Prince Abbas Mirza (1783-1833), which practically meant that his hereditary district of Shahrezur, located north of Baghdad, would pass under Iranian authority. In reaction to Mahmud Pasha's pledge of allegiance to the Qajars, the Porte insisted on installing its own candidate, thus providing a sufficiently strong impetus for the outbreak of hostilities between the two states. The Treaty of Erzurum on July 18, 1823 ended the conflict by reaffirming the terms of boundary status quo contained in the previous Treaty of Kurdan (1846).

The Treaty of Erzurum, however, brought up a new set of provisions regarding “merchants, pilgrims, the delivery of refugees, release of all prisoners, and the residence of ministers at the respective courts.”<sup>68</sup> While the treaty did not touch on the issue of clearly demarcated boundaries, its concern with the movement of tribes pointed to the emerging significance of inchoate modern interstate dynamics between the two *ancien régimes*. In other words, while the two states acknowledged mutual authority over their respective territorial boundaries, they nevertheless exhibited relatively stronger interest in “keeping the borderland peoples within their territorial limits, which now aimed to coincide more precisely with the limits of sovereignty.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Sabri Ates, “Empires at the Margin: Towards a History of the Ottoman-Iranian Borderland and the Borderland Peoples, 1843–1881” (New York University, 2006), 39.

<sup>69</sup> Ates, 39.

It has often been argued that wars make nations. This could not be any less true in relation to the projects of nation-building in Qajar Iran and the Ottoman Empire in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Both of these states clashed with each other frequently and engaged in a series of frontier wars with their more powerful rivals, Russia and Britain. In the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Russia's victories in the Balkans and the Caucasus unsettled affairs in the two Muslim empires, whose continued territorial hemorrhage stunted their aspirations for the restoration of a glorious past. In the case of Iran, as Kashani-Sabet has noted, the Qajar kings, seeking to emulate their predecessors, had undertaken to extend their sovereignty to neighboring territories. However, such efforts ran up against similar ambitions of their imperial rivals. Thus, the conflicts with Russia, Britain, and the Ottoman Empire kicked off the process of defining the modern frontiers of Iran. In turn, "the sketching of exact boundaries forged a new image of the "Guarded Domains" (*mamalik-i mahrusah*), and therefore of what the Iranian territories comprised."<sup>70</sup>

Thus, wars turned the question of making boundaries into an urgent issue for the survival and regeneration of imperial might. Consciousness of the need to strengthen state territorial jurisdiction over the periphery sprang from the alarming prospects of further territorial contraction in the frontier zones. In order to reverse this growing trend, the Qajars and Ottomans focused their attention on checking the incessant frontier frictions that had come to undermine the state's writ. Following the example set by Sabri Ateş' seminal study of the Ottoman-Iranian borderlands, this dissertation also draws on the model proposed by McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly concerning the process of state capacity expansion. These scholars have suggested that "When state capacity increases, it

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<sup>70</sup> Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions: Shaping the Iranian Nation, 1804-1946* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1999), 4.

does so through four often-complementary processes: the replacement of indirect by direct rule; the penetration by central states of geographic peripheries; the standardization of state practices and identities, and instrumentation – growth in the means of carrying out intended policies.”<sup>71</sup> This is exactly what happened in the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the Ottoman elites, embarked on an ambitious project of reforms that entailed replacement of indirect rule by extending state authority to the peripheries. Appointing governors from the center and enforcement of new taxation and conscription laws also constituted attempts to standardize state practices. Making the boundary, however, ranged among the most ambitious measure to incorporate the periphery and alter and bind the identities of the border-landers to the imperial center.

#### **OTTOMAN CENTRALIZATION CAMPAIGNS AND KURDISH RESISTANCE IN THE FRONTIER ZONE:**

In order to prepare the grounds for the inauguration of the Iranian-Ottoman boundary-making process in 1843, the prerequisite for the expansion of state capacity and surveillance, the autonomous Kurdish frontier emirates/*beyliks* first needed to be eliminated before sovereignty over those regions could be restored to the Porte. As such, among the initial tasks assigned to the reorganized Ottoman military apparatus was the demolition of the power of the Kurdish *derebeys* [hereditary local rulers]. In Kurdistan, which represented a classic example of a frontier zone covering the margins of three empires in southeastern Anatolia, Mesopotamia, the Caucasus, and Azerbaijan, the replacement of the Kurdish *beys* was bound to encounter fierce local resistance. In the wake of recent Russian wars and the occupation of Syria by Egyptian forces, all pretense

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<sup>71</sup> McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, 78. See also Sabri Ateş, *Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands*.

of Ottoman sovereignty over those areas had been lost. Such a widespread crisis of legitimacy over loss of state authority in the region powered the resistance of ambitious *derbeys*, pulling Ottoman and Kurdish armies into a series of bloody encounters. While the Ottoman state sought to remove the opportunity for the Kurdish *beys* to enter into dangerous coalitions with the occupation forces of Ibrahim Pasha in Syria, the Kurdish princes made utmost efforts to arrest the extending reach of the state's arm into their hereditary fiefdoms.

These conflicting interests augured ill for the regions' diverse inhabitants as the period of the 1830s and 1840s witnessed a marked increase in conflict between the Kurdish dynasts, the Ottoman state, and the local Christian and Yezidi tribal strongholds. The history of the rise and fall of the last two most powerful Kurdish *beyliks* of Soran and Bohtan represent exemplary cases of encounter between the centralizing Ottoman state and a resistant Kurdish polity and the grave consequences it dealt peaceful intercommunal relations. The histories of these two emirates serve to illustrate the changing contours of Kurdish-Christian intercommunal dynamics in a period marked by radical transformation of the sociopolitical landscape of Kurdistan. The underlying argument of this chapter is that the Kurdish princes' large-scale revolts and campaigns of conquest and expansion, which resulted in a tremendous amount of violence directed against Muslims and to a large extent non-Muslim groups, constituted political struggles for survival rather than sectarian strife. To put it in different terms, the conflicts were not primarily driven by religious animosities between different confessional groups, as it has been often claimed. Rather, these discords sprang from a marked decline in government authority and a general diminished state of security followed by the frantic and misguided Ottoman military campaigns to counter the *derebeys*' initiatives to strengthen their local authority.

Despite the numerous setbacks in its initial attempts to centralize control, during the 1830s and the 1840s, the Porte was, by and large, able to meet the Kurdish challenge in the more strategic regions of Ottoman power in Diyarbakir, Van, and Erzurum. These districts were considered the limits of the frontier zone and had traditionally served as Ottoman garrison towns, thereby rendering their control an absolute necessity in the eyes of the Porte. Moreover, in these areas, following the 1828-19 Russo-Ottoman war, the large exodus of the Armenian peasantry for the safety of the Russian controlled Caucasus had enabled the Kurdish tribes to seize control of the vacated lands. Thus, the underlying potential causes for further conflict had vanished, providing the Ottomans with a greater degree of success in reestablishing direct rule.<sup>72</sup>

Furthermore, as Ronald Dennis has demonstrated, unlike their counterparts in the Balkans, the Christian groups of southeastern Anatolia did not stage widespread rebellions against their Kurdish and Ottoman overlords for several reasons. First, the diffusion of the Armenian and Nestorian communities among their more numerous Kurdish neighbors neutralized the possibility of an organized revolt. For securing any degree of success in staging a revolt, the Christians needed their Muslim neighbors' cooperation, which was not likely to occur following Russia's forays into the region, and the Kurdish suspicion of Christian sympathies for the invaders.

Secondly, the Armenians of southeastern Anatolia were subservient to the *amira* class of Armenian elites in Istanbul, who, in collaboration with the ruling circles, dominated the politics of the Armenian *millet* in southeastern Anatolia. The interests of the *amira* class of merchants and ecclesiastics in the capital were after all closely bound in with those of their Ottoman governing elite. This pragmatic alliance undermined the

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<sup>72</sup> Dennis, "Explaining Coexistence and Conflict in Eastern Anatolia, 1800-1878," 125.

possibility for the emergence of the spirit of rebellion among the more vulnerable Armenian peasantry and ecclesiastical notables of Anatolia.<sup>73</sup>

Thirdly, “Russia's policy toward the Armenians in the Caucasus generally limited the influence and spread of Armenian liberationism.”<sup>74</sup> Russia had occupied the Caucasus to use the region as a base of operations against the Ottomans and Iranians and was only willing to give limited latitude to their Armenian communities in the form of *polozhenie*, “an imperial decree that specified a number of privileges that Russia would grant the Armenian church.”<sup>75</sup> The *polozhenie* served a double purpose. On one hand, it curbed Armenian ecclesiastical rivalry by stipulating specific procedures for the election of the catholicos of Etchmiadzin, thereby checking the possibility of revolts through the church. On the other hand, it gave extensive new powers to the members of the synod (advisers of the catholicos), who directly reported to the tsar, thus undermining the catholicos’ independent power of decision-making.<sup>76</sup> Such a policy served the new Russian overlords effectively by enabling them to manage the affairs of the newly acquired territories with minimum opposition from Armenian political dissidents.

However, the conditions were different in the southern regions of eastern Anatolia and Mesopotamia, where powerful *beyliks* dominated the Iranian-Ottoman frontier. Across this extremely inhospitable rugged mountainous terrain, the state’s writ had long remained nominal. Thanks to this geographic advantage, coupled with the absence of a strong imperial Christian rival such as Russia, the Kurdish lords had secured a higher

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<sup>73</sup> See Hagop Levon Barsoumian, *The Armenian Amira Class of Istanbul* (Yerevan, Armenia: American University of Armenia, 2007). See also Barsoumian’s article “The Dual Role of the Armenian Amira Class Within the Ottoman Government and the Armenian Millet” in *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, edited by Benjamin Braude (Boulder, Colorado : Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2014), 133-146.

<sup>74</sup> Dennis, “Explaining Coexistence and Conflict in Eastern Anatolia, 1800-1878,” 130.

<sup>75</sup> Dennis, 130.

<sup>76</sup> Christopher J Walker, *Armenia: The Survival of a Nation* (London: Routledge, 1991), 56.



degree of autonomy from the Ottomans in the form of *hükümet*s [independent *beylik*s]. Following the Ottoman defeats and the establishment of Russian power in the Caucasus, even the little nominal authority of the Porte over such *beylik*s as Soran and Bohtan had altogether evaporated. In light of such steep diminishment of state power, the Kurdish lords of the marches had turned the uncertain situation of imperial decline into opportunity for expansion and conquest. The history of the two most illustrious Kurdish *beys* of Sorna and Bohtan, which seriously jeopardized Ottoman efforts in restoration of central power in the 1830s and 1840s, serve to exhibit the nature of the conflicts that dislocated intercommunal relations among the Kurdish, Yezidi, and Nestorian tribes of the region.

The ambitious *bey* (prince) of Soran *beylik*, Kör Muhammad Pasha (called the blind Pasha for his blindness in one eye) exploited the political turmoil resulting from the disastrous wars rocking the Ottoman and Qajar empires in the 1820s. The Kurdish *bey* took advantage of the opportunity handed by the Ottoman preoccupation with the Greek revolts and the Ottoman-Iranian war of 1821-23 to subdue the feuding frontier tribes, especially those of the Bilbas confederation inside Iranian territory,<sup>77</sup> and to consolidate his seat of power at Rawanduz. By 1824, amidst regional chaos and an endemic state of insecurity, the *bey* furthered his expansions by annexing parts of the territory of the Baban *beylik* including Köy Sancak, Arbil, Altın Köprü, and Ranya. Faced with *fait accompli*, the Mamluk governor of Baghdad conceded his annexations and conferred upon Kör Muhammad the title of Pasha of Rawanduz, the capital of his *beylik* of Soran.<sup>78</sup> When the Iranian Qajars went to a second disastrous war with Russia in 1826-28, Kör

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<sup>77</sup> James Baillie Fraser, *Travels in Koordistan, Mesopotamia, &c, Including an Account of Parts of Those Countries Hitherto Unvisited by Europeans. With Sketches of the Character and Manners of the Koordish and Arab Tribes* (London R. Bentley, 1840), 103,

<sup>78</sup> Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development*, 1st ed, Contemporary Issues in the Middle East (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 56.

Muhammad was able to also recapture the territory he had lost to Prince Abbas Mirza across the frontier in Iran.<sup>79</sup> In a similar manner, subsequent to the Russian defeat of the Ottoman Empire in 1829 and the landing of Egyptian naval forces in Palestine in 1831, the Kurdish Pasha turned his attention northward in the direction of the territory of the weak Behdinan *beylik*, northeast of Mosul.

A common tribal skirmish between the Yezidis of Shaykhan and the Kurdish Mizuri tribal confederation, both of which were subservient to Behdinan *mirs* of Amadiya, provided a legitimate cause for Kör Muhammad Pasha's intervention. When the pleas of Mullah Yahya of Mizuri for assistance against the Yezidis fell on deaf ears in the Behdinan court, the *mullah* resorted to Muhammad Pasha for help against the hostile Yezidi 'infidels'.<sup>80</sup> The leading religious notable of Rawanduz, Mullah Muhammad Khati, issued a *fatwa*, declaring war against the rebellious Yezidis of Shaykhan a religious duty. Seizing the moment as opportune to mobilize a large force on a religious call to arms, Kör Mohammad Pasha led a formidable expedition into Shaykhan and the country surrounding Mosul, killing thousands of Yazidis and Christians and pillaging religious sites on his path.<sup>81</sup> Other than the regular tribal skirmish that legitimized the *mir's* punitive expedition against the Yazidis, the widespread perception of Yezidi and Christian sympathies toward Russia against the Ottoman state and the Kurdish *beyliks* had also made the non-Muslim elements suspicious of being receptive to foreign control, especially that of Russia.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Fraser, *Travels in Koordistan*, 64.

<sup>80</sup> Al-Mizuri is reported to have been an ardent follower of Shaykh Khalid al-Naqshbandi after he desisted from his initial opposition to the rapid proliferation of the Naqshbandi ideals of firm abidance by the Shari'a. See Al-Ghazzi, *Husul*, 16-17 mentioned in Foley's *Shaykh Khalid and the Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya, 1776-2005*, 2005.

<sup>81</sup> Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement*, 56-58.

<sup>82</sup> Dennis, "Explaining Coexistence and Conflict in Eastern Anatolia, 1800-1878," 133-34.

Following Kör Muhammad Pasha's unhindered conquests of the Yezidi heartland and the Christian and Kurdish districts east of Mosul, in 1833, the Pasha exploited the situation further to restore the old glory of the Soran *beylik*.<sup>83</sup> He crushed Akra and Amadiya, the capital of the Behdinan *beylik*, with assistance from a disgruntled member of the princely family, Musa Pasha, whom he appointed as his vassal ruler. Not satisfied with that, the *bey* continued his war of expansion northward, securing the annexation of the territories of the Bohtan *beylik* in Jazirah, south of Mardin. However, rebellion in Amadiya stunted his further expansion, compelling Kör Muhammad to turn back and quell the rebellion with extreme violence.<sup>84</sup> No longer trusting the subjugated but resistant locals to rule on his behalf, the *bey* sought to centralize control by appointing his own brother as the new ruler of Amadiya.<sup>85</sup> He had pursued a similar measure in the other districts such as the strategic town of Arbil that had recently been added to his list of takeovers.

During his tenure, the ambitious Kör Muhammad sought unsuccessfully to establish contact with the Egyptian Ibrahim Pasha, which alarmed the Ottoman authorities. Besides, his swollen prestige had secured him the alliance of the *bey* of Bohtan, who would later play an even more prominent role in the Kurdish resistance against Ottoman centralization efforts. By 1834, Kör Muhammad Pasha ruled over a vast swath of territory from Rawanduz to Jazirah, which included such important urban and religious centers as Amadiya, Jizre, Zakho, Akra, Dahuk, Erüh, Tel Afar, and Shaykhan. As evident from the accounts of European travelers and physicians, Kör Muhammad was extremely suspicious of foreigners for the possibility of their connivance with the

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<sup>83</sup> Dennis, 133.

<sup>84</sup> Fraser, *Travels in Koordistan*, 80.

<sup>85</sup> Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement*, 59–60.

Ottomans. Thus, he made cautious efforts to keep their influence at bay. For instance, when Dr. Ross, the physician of the British resident at Baghdad, was invited to Rawanduz to treat K r Muhammad’s father, he was placed under strict watch and escorted everywhere lest he stray from camp to gather intelligence. The British traveler, Fraser, was also advised against venturing into the districts under the *bey*’s control on account of the Pasha’s suspicion of foreigners as being spies.<sup>86</sup> It seems clear that the Kurdish Pasha was well aware of the status of the new powers in the region and was wary of their influence in his country. Not surprisingly, it was precisely their influence that led to his downfall.

K r Muhammad Pasha’s expeditions into the Iranian side of the frontier had alarmed the Russian government in the Caucasus, as the annexed districts of Somai and Beradost, west of Lake Urmia, provided easy access to the Russian Caucasian frontiers. By 1835, the Russian government, which faced its own problem of pacification of the Muslim tribes under the leadership of Imam Shamil in their acquired Caucasian territories, had adopted a similar policy to that of Great Britain. Both Russia and Britain regarded the integrity of the Ottoman and Iranian states as an asset in serving as buffer zones against encroachments of the rival power. In 1833, Russia came to the aid of the Porte against the existential danger posed by Mehmet Ali of Egypt, and signed the Treaty of Unkiar Iskelesi with the Porte, pledging “alliance and mutual defense.”<sup>87</sup> Running against Russia’s interests in the straits and the Caucasus, Egyptian and Kurdish ambitions in the Ottoman Syria and Anatolia constituted undesirable developments. A Kurdish and

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<sup>86</sup> Fraser, *Travels in Koordistan*, 81.

<sup>87</sup> Charles Jelavich and Barbara Jelavich, *The Establishment of the Balkan National States, 1804-1920* (Seattle; London: University of Washington Press, 1977), 102.

Egyptian coalition could also pose a threat to Russia's prospects of gaining control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelle straits and the prize city of Istanbul itself.

The motivation to join forces with Ibrahim Pasha in Syria seemed to have been prevalent among the Kurdish dynastic elites. For instance, an exiled member of the Behdinan *beylik* in Iran, Selim Pasha, confided in the American missionaries in Urumia that his objective for travelling to Erzurum in European attire was to join Ibrahim Pasha, whom he thought would march on Russia soon. Great Britain also regarded the integrity of the Ottoman and Qajar polities as a priority. In fact, preserving the two states as buffer zones against further Russian encroachments on strategic British interests in the Mediterranean Sea and India and to maintain the European balance of power would form the cornerstone of British policy in the course of the long 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>88</sup>

Faced with widespread crisis of legitimacy in the Arab East and in Kurdistan, a situation exacerbated by the Ottomans' reliance on assistance from Christian powers, the Porte was nevertheless able to dispatch a formidable force to reduce the unrest. The famous Mehmet Reşid Pasha, the governor of Sivas, was commissioned to end the insurrection in Kurdistan. Through a combination of coercion and diplomacy, Reşid Pasha managed to establish control over the restive districts of Dersim and Harput in the north before moving southward to prevent a coalition between the Kurdish *beys* and the Egyptians. In 1835, Mehmet Pasha, known as Ince Bayraktar (the lean flag-bearer), was also appointed as the *vali* of Mosul. His appointment buttressed the government power in checking further Kurdish unrest in the province of Mosul. Since the *mir* of Rawanduz's brutal tactics had earned him many enemies among the Kurds inhabiting the areas he had annexed, Reşid Pasha was easily able to coopt the disaffected elements. Defection of a

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<sup>88</sup> Michael Eppel, "The Demise of the Kurdish Emirates: The Impact of Ottoman Reforms and International Relations on Kurdistan during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," *Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 2 (2008): 251.

number of Kurdish sheikhs, *muftis*, and *beys* of Amadiya, Zakho, and Akra, who issued *fatwas* against the Kurdish *mir*'s campaigns, also boosted the resolve of Reşid Pasha's expeditionary forces. A sudden turn of events in early 1836, however, momentarily halted his campaign against the *mir*. Ibrahim Pasha of Egypt's move to capture Baghdad compelled Reşid Pasha to rush to Urfa, where he engaged Ibrahim's forces.<sup>89</sup> Reşid Pasha, however, resumed the campaign in the spring of 1836, took Jazira, the power center of the Azizan family of Bohtan *beylik*, and then moved southward against Soran.

By the time Reşid Pasha reached Soran, the strength of Kör Muhammad Pasha's forces had been eroded by local resistance, leading the *mir* to consider Reşid Pasha's proposals. The Kurdish *mir* finally surrendered to the Ottoman forces on the promise that he would be officially reinstated to his position at Rawanduz as a *mutesellim*. In addition to Reşid Pasha's strong negotiating skills in effecting Muhammad Pasha's submission (the British consul also claimed credit for that), his decision was reportedly affected by Mullah Muhammad Khati's backing of the sultan-caliph. The very senior cleric of Rawanduz, who had legitimized the *mir*'s campaign against the Yezidis, issued another *fatwa*, declaring hostility against the Ottoman Caliph's troops unlawful.<sup>90</sup> The Pasha of Rawanduz's reappointment, following the untimely death of Reşid Pasha of cholera in Diyarbakir in 1836,<sup>91</sup> was rendered infeasible as combined opposition from the new *vali* of Baghdad, Ali Riza Pasha and the local Kurdish notables, convinced Hafiz Pasha, the successor of Reşid, to keep the *mir* at Amasiya, where he died or was killed.<sup>92</sup>

In the course of Kör Muhammad Pasha's wars of expansion, the Yezidi enclaves of Sinjar and Shaykhan in the neighborhood of Mosul bore the brunt of the *mir*'s

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<sup>89</sup> Dennis, "Explaining Coexistence and Conflict in Eastern Anatolia, 1800-1878," 138.

<sup>90</sup> Eppel, "The Demise of the Kurdish Emirates," 251.

<sup>91</sup> Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement*, 55.

<sup>92</sup> Jwaideh, 60–61.

campaigns. The chief was able to rally men to his campaigns on account of skillful deployment of religious rhetoric against fighting ‘infidels’. Following his defeat, Hafiz Pasha continued his relentless campaigns of suppression of pockets of resistance, as part of which the rebellious Yezidis at Tal Afar, escaping harm from Reşid Pasha’s campaigns, received another massive blow in June and July of 1837. The British Consul of Erzurum, James Brant, reported that “the slaughter was very considerable and the prisoners numerous who were being sold as slaves at Diarbekir wither Hafiz Pasha had returned.”<sup>93</sup> In a different dispatch, Brant received further confirmation concerning the slaughter of the Yezidis from Colonel Considine and Captain Campbell who visited Diyarbakir after the campaign. “He [Campbell] represents the affair of the Sinjah Dagħ [Mount Sinjar] Koords as a mere slaughter and burning of villages, little or no resistance having been made on the part of the [Yezidi] Koords: he arrived, however, after the affair.”<sup>94</sup> While evidently religious rhetoric was widely invoked during the Kurdish campaigns against non-Muslims, the overall pattern of the *mir*’s expeditions, during which both Kurds, Christians, and Yezidis suffered heavily, is strong indication that the driver of conflict was political rather than sectarian. The use of extreme violence was not confined to the Kurdish camp. The Ottoman governor, Hafiz Paşş, also recruited droves of Kurdish villagers to quell the insurrection, in the process laying waste to the livelihoods and lives of a vast number of the inhabitants across religious and sectarian lines, which in turn triggered more violence.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Brant to Palmerston. Erzeroom, July 11, 1837. The Record of the Kurds, Vol. 1, p. 149.

<sup>94</sup> Brant to Palmerston. Erzeroom, July 14, 1837. No.4. The Record of the Kurds, Vol. 1, p. 150.

<sup>95</sup> Hans-Lukas Kieser, *İskalanmış barış doğu vilayetleri’nde misyonerlik, etnik kimlik ve devlet 1839-1938* = *Der verpasste Friede: Mission, Ethnie und Staat in den Ostprovinzen der Türkei 1839-1938* (Cağaloğlu, İstanbul: İletişim, 2005), 66.

The penetration of the region by the British-supported Ottoman armies, whose weakness had become painfully clear in their successive defeats against the Russians in the Caucasus and the Egyptians in Syria, had set the *mir* of Soran's campaigns of expansion in motion. The removal of the hereditary Mamluk Pasha of Baghdad had further convinced the *mir* of an impending Ottoman threat to Kurdish independent rule. Thus, violence on both sides was extremely high as both the Ottomans and the Kurdish *bey* faced an existential crisis. The Ottoman state's campaigns of centralization in northern Kurdistan in Diyarbakir, Van, and Erzurum, and in the south in Sulaymaniyya and Baghdad had prompted the *mir* to make preemptive strikes. It appears that the *mir*'s initial expansionary conquests in the 1820s had stemmed from a desire for establishing security, while his later northward expeditions in the 1830s, which caused much havoc and loss of life, especially among the Yezidis, were motivated by the desire to restore and preserve the Kurdish dynastic rule of the Soran *beylik*. The latter phase of his campaigns coincided with Reşid Pasha's preparations to march southward against his stronghold. In the sympathetic international milieu, with both Russia and Britain favoring restoration of Iranian and Ottoman sovereignty in the frontier zone, the Porte succeeded in replacing the Mamluk rule in both Mosul and Baghdad with Ottoman governors. The Porte was also able to install a pro-Ottoman *mir* to the enfeebled seat of the *beylik* of Baban south of Rawanduz and more importantly to appropriate religious rhetoric to undermine the legitimacy of the *mir* of Soran's political struggle for survival. Thus, the first major Kurdish resistance movement against the Ottoman drive for centralization came to a definitive end.



## **BEDIR KHAN BEY AND THE MASSACRE OF THE NESTORIANS OF HAKKARI:**

Bedir Khan Bey of Bohtan's revolt and power acquisition in the 1840s constitutes another exemplary case of the Kurdish dynastic power struggle. Similar to his predecessor's political endeavors, the *mir* of Bohtan's primary motivation was to preserve his privileges as the independent ruler of a Kurdish *beylik*. Nevertheless, his political struggle for survival involved large-scale communal violence against the Yazidis and Nestorians of Tur Abidin and the semi-independent Nestorian tribes of Hakkari. Again, symptomatic of Ottoman government's deep legitimacy crisis in Kurdistan, Bedir Khan Bey's revolt and rise to unprecedented power occurred amidst the widespread chaos that had resulted from Reşid Pasha's and the more ruthless Hafiz Pasha's one-sided policy of using coercion to centralize control in Kurdistan. While Hafiz Pasha's expeditions resulted in the destruction of several of Bedir Khan's regional rivals, as Dennis has rightly pointed out, "the scope and brutality of his campaigns also gave Kurds throughout Bohtan, Behdinan, Müküs, and Soran a shared traumatic experience for Bedir Khan to seize upon in uniting them against the Ottoman state."<sup>96</sup> Visiting the area in 1842, the Anglican missionary Badger said of the Kurds of Jazira, "So many and grievous were the complaints of these peasants against the cruelty and oppression of their Turkish rulers, that the stand which they made a few years after under Bedir Khan Beg, the Emeer of Jezeerah, is not a matter of surprise."<sup>97</sup> Hafiz Pasha's defeat in the battle of Nizip against the more organized army of Ibrahim Pasha of Egypt in 1839 also contributed to Bedir Khan's amassing of power by delaying the Ottoman state's project of centralization in Kurdistan. The powerful *bey* of Bohtan further consolidated his

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<sup>96</sup> Dennis, "Explaining Coexistence and Conflict in Eastern Anatolia, 1800-1878," 150.

<sup>97</sup> George Percy Badger and J. M. (John Mason) Neale, *The Nestorians and Their Rituals : With the Narrative of a Mission to Mesopotamia and Coordistan in 1842-1844, and of a Late Visit to Those Countries in 1850 ; Also, Researches into the Present Condition of the Syrian Jacobites, Papal Syrians, and Chaldeans, and an Inquiry into the Religious Tenets of the Yezedees* (London : Joseph Masters, 1852), 46.

grassroots base of support at Jazira by building effective alliances with the *mirs* of Hakkari and Müküs.

In 1843, Bedir Khan dispatched a large force to support his ally, Nurallah Bey of Hakkari in subduing the rebellious mountain Nestorians in his *beylik*. During this campaign, thousands of Nestorians were massacred, which raised outcries in Europe and the United States. Bedir Khan, like his predecessor, Kör Muhammad Pasha exploited religious rhetoric to mobilize warriors against the mountain Nestorians. Amidst the chaos of Ottoman centralization and Kurdish wars of resistance, the mountain Nestorians had provoked suspicion among the Kurds by receiving frequent visits from American and Anglican missionaries based in Urumia and Mosul, respectively. Thus, the massacre of the Nestorians cannot be analyzed without considering the wider context and the numerous conflicts ravaging the region. As Dennis has argued, “Each conflict seemed either to trigger a new one or to escalate preexisting tensions into a conflict in such a way that the ultimate result was the massacre of thousands of Nestorian Christians and the emergence of Bedr Khan Bey as the most powerful Kurdish elite in southeastern Anatolia and northern Iraq.”<sup>98</sup>

Due to a paucity of information on the Kurdish *beyliks* and the mountain Nestorian tribal communities, much of the research on the intercommunal relations of these groups has had to rely on western travelogues, missionary accounts, and British consular posts and the more recent attempts at excavation of Ottoman archives. Thus, the research conducted, for the most part, reflects the opinion of the missionaries and British officials of the time. For instance, Hirmis Aboona, a Nestorian scholar, traces the reasons behind Bedir Khan’s massacres of 1843 and 1846 in the connivance of the Kurdish *bey*

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<sup>98</sup> Dennis, “Explaining Coexistence and Conflict in Eastern Anatolia, 1800-1878,” 162.

with the Ottoman *valis* of Mosul and Erzurum, whose centralizing agenda dovetailed with those of the *bey* for accumulation of power. In other words, Aboona argues that the *vali* of Mosul, Ince Bayraktar Mehmet Pasha's object of subduing the independent Nestorians of Hakkari through Kurdish agency was a continuation of the centralization drive, which unfolded in the form of removing one rival group through another. Aboona's argument is a direct reproduction of the Anglican missionary, George Percy Badger's opinions. This line of reasoning ostensibly seems plausible as he has cited evidence to demonstrate that Bedir Khan Bey did seek the approval of the *vali* of Mosul before mounting the expedition against the Nestorians in 1843.<sup>99</sup> Yet, since the Ottomans were backed by the British at the time and the Porte sought to please the European powers by improving the status of the Christians of the empire, Bedir Khan Bey's alleged connivance with the Ottomans to eliminate the Nestorians on account of Muslim fanaticism should not be accepted uncritically. Bedir Khan's communication with the *vali* can be regarded as a political strategy by the *bey* to convey the sense that he remained loyal to the Ottoman government even as he ran the affairs of his *beylik* independently. This is consistent with the history of the Kurdish *beyliks*. As Hakan Özoğlu has demonstrated, the Kurdish *beys* never acted in total defiance of the Ottoman Porte and it is more likely that the *bey* acted in keeping with the recognized tradition of ruling semi-independently within the Ottoman imperial traditions of devolution of power to hereditary local rulers in Kurdistan.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, as Dennis has rightly pointed out, in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the Ottoman centralization drive was in full swing, Kurdish power undoubtedly presented a greater cause for anxiety to the Ottomans than

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<sup>99</sup> Aboona, *Assyrians, Kurds, and Ottomans*, 203.

<sup>100</sup> Hakan Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries*, SUNY Series in Middle Eastern Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 53–63.

the minimal threat the Nestorians may have posed. Thus, far from having been inspired by ethnic or sectarian motivations, the coordinated expedition of the *bey* with the *vali* could be said to reflect the *bey*'s virtuoso in using realpolitik in his struggle for survival.

Wadie Jwaideh has similarly analyzed the conflict in the context of Ottoman *tanzimat*, which led to the unsettlement of Kurdish sociopolitical system and the creation of resistance movements.<sup>101</sup> The more recent scholarship, drawing on Ottoman archives, has sought to exonerate Ottoman complicity by magnifying Kurdish and great power and missionary culpability.<sup>102</sup> The most recent and thorough study, however, has been conducted by Ronald Dennis, who has integrated Armenian, Ottoman, Russian, Arabic and English accounts to situate the conflict in the wider context of the changing dynamics of southeastern Anatolia as a result of Russo-Turkish wars, the Ottoman *tanzimat* reforms, and the diverging communal paths taken by Kurdish, Nestorian, and Armenian communities. While Dennis has also situated the Nestorian massacres in the context of the Ottoman efforts to reestablish central authority over Kurdistan, his study sets itself apart by focusing on the communal relations in the wider context of southeastern Anatolia. His rigorous research reveals a more complicated picture arising from converging effects of Russian aggression, Ottoman administrative endeavors, British policies, and missionary activities on creating the conditions for conflicts that were driven more by the urgency of political survival than primordial confessional motivations.

The picture that emerges from Dennis' detailed narrative of the Kurdish-Nestorian conflict portrays the Nestorian communities as disparate groups spread out over a

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<sup>101</sup> Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement*.

<sup>102</sup> Salahi Ramadan Sonyel, *The Assyrians of Turkey: Victims of Major Power Policy* (Ankara: Turkish Historical Society Printing House, 2001).

diversely populated geography, featuring political divisions and denominational differences, which were exacerbated by spirited missionary rivalry. The topographical diffusion of the Nestorians inhabiting the plains of Urumia, Mosul, and the mountains of Hakkari and Tur Abedin also found a parallel in the linguistic diversity of these largely isolated communities. While the Nestorians of Hakkari spoke “a corrupt Syriac”, which “varies considerably in different provinces,” their dialects were “mixed up with many Arabic words in the villages around Mosul, with Coordish in the Tyari and Hakkari, and with Persian in and about Ooroomiah.”<sup>103</sup> When the American missionaries in Urumia started publishing articles in the dialect of the plain Nestorians, in an effort to revitalize the Syriac language of what they initially thought was a unified Nestorian community, their coreligionists in the mountains of Hakkari complained of its incomprehensibility. Notably, many Nestorians were also conversant in Kurdish.<sup>104</sup> This linguistic diversity, not dissimilar to that characterizing the Kurdish social milieu, points to the Nestorian and Kurdish tribes’ loose communal cohesion. However, like their Kurdish *ashiret* counterparts, the Nestorians of Hakkari, by logic of isolation in their mountain hideouts, constituted a more homogeneous community. Yet, that did not necessarily translate into political unity as their political loyalties were not necessarily predicated on religious affiliation.

Justin Perkins, the pioneer American missionary, who established the American Protestant mission field in Urumia in Iranian Azerbaijan, provides a detailed description of the status of the Nestorian communities vis-à-vis their Kurdish neighbors:

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<sup>103</sup> Badger and Neale, *The Nestorians and Their Rituals*, 218.

<sup>104</sup> Asahel Grant, *The Nestorians; or, The Lost Tribes: Containing Evidence of Their Identity; an Account of Their Manners, Customs, and Ceremonies; Together with Sketches of Travels in Ancient Assyria, Armenia, Media, and Mesopotamia; and Illustrations of Scripture Prophecy*. (New York: Harper & Bros., 1841), 34.

The Nestorians of Koordistan inhabit the wildest and most inaccessible parts of the Koordish mountains. Some of the districts occupied by them are so rough that no beasts of burden can travel over them, and even men find it difficult to climb about from cliff to cliff. The least populous districts of these Nestorians, as Gavar, Somai, Chara, Mamoodiah, and some others, are subject to the Koordish tribes who dwell in the same districts, and by whom (being by far the most numerous) the Nestorians are severely oppressed and often plundered. Other districts, as Diz, Jeeloo, Bass, Tehoob [Tkhuma], and Tiaree, have a larger Nestorian population, and are more independent of their Koordish neighbors...It [Tiyari] is governed by Meliks (literally kings) or chiefs, chosen from its own people by the popular voice irregularly expressed. The office of these chiefs is usually, though not always, hereditary in the same family. This district of Tiaree is not only quite independent of the Koords, but its inhabitants have such a character for bravery and ferocity, towards their Koordish neighbors, that the latter seldom hazard the adventure of entering that country.... The Turkish government is now making vigorous efforts, through the agency of the koords, which have been attended with a measure of success, to reduce all those independent Nestorians to a state of vassalage.<sup>105</sup>

Mirroring their Kurdish neighbors' sociopolitical structure, the mountain Nestorians of Hakkari were also tribally organized into separate communities under their chiefs, known as *maliks* (chiefs). Their spiritual head, Mar Shimun, the highest ecclesiastical authority in the Church of the East, lived in Kochanes near the town of Julemerk, the second capital of the *mir* of Hakkari. While recognizing Mar Shimun as their spiritual head, whose blessing they occasionally sought, the *maliks* of Tiyari, Tkhuma, Jilu, Diz, and Baz made political decisions independently of the patriarch.<sup>106</sup> Not dissimilar to the Kurdish *bey*s, Mar Shimun also performed a series of temporal functions as the spiritual and temporal head of his Christian flock when he was able to exert his influence. According to Badger, his civil authority was actually strengthened by the *bey* of Hakkari, and litigants in disputes were free to choose to take their complaints

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<sup>105</sup> Justin Perkins, *A Residence of Eight Years in Persia, among the Nestorian Christians; with Notices of the Muhammedans* (Andover, New York: Allen, Morrill & Wardell; M.W. Dodd;[etc., etc.], 1843), 6.

<sup>106</sup> Dennis, "Explaining Coexistence," 159; Smith and Dwight, *Researches of the Rev. E. Smith and Rev. H. G. O. Dwight in Armenia*, 218.

to the patriarch or the *bey*.<sup>107</sup> Mar Shimun also undertook to collect the *kharaj* taxes levied on the Nestorian tribes by the Kurdish *bey*, Nurallah, a tribute exacted when the *beys* held a stronger position and did not feel the need to appease the Nestorians. The independence of the more formidable Nestorian *ashirets* [tribal confederations] such as those in Tiyyari and Jilu, however, was recognized by the *beys* of Hakkari, who “granted to the Nestorians the right of clanship, which freed them from tribute, and gave them a voice in the election of the emeer [*bey*], and in all the councils of the tribes.”<sup>108</sup> In return, the Nestorian *ashirets* were required to lend armed support to the *bey* when necessary. This situation, in some way, reflected the dynamics underlying the relations of the Kurdish dynasts with that of the Ottoman state, albeit on a smaller scale.

In 1840, before disagreements between the *bey* and the patriarch upset the age-old balance of the jointly run Kurdo-Christian *beylik* of Hakkari, there was a great degree of mutual trust between the two chiefs. This bond was sufficiently strong for the *bey* to have reportedly delegated his office to Mar Shimun in his absence.<sup>109</sup> As elsewhere in Kurdistan, the Kurds evidently paid little attention to the religious differences of their Christian neighbors as long they stayed out of the business of Kurdish politics. Dennis argues that the religious diversity of the Nestorian and Yazidi communities may have been even preferred by the Kurdish chiefs as these differences may very well have facilitated the chiefs’ tax collection efforts from rival communities.

The 1843 Kurdish massacre of the mountain Nestorians of Hakkari remains a point of contention between scholars. Many have blamed zealous missionary activity as a catalyst, if not the primary cause, that ignited the hostilities and the ensuing atrocities.

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<sup>107</sup> Badger and Neale, *The Nestorians and Their Rituals*, 259.

<sup>108</sup> Badger and Neale, 258.

<sup>109</sup> Aboona, *Assyrians, Kurds, and Ottomans*, 164.

Missionary reconnaissance of the Nestorian country in Qajar Iran and the Ottoman Empire had begun in the 1820s, just as the Ottoman government strove to reorganize the empire to withstand the onslaught of Western penetration. The American Protestant missionaries and their Catholic and Anglican rivals sought to revitalize the Church of the East through education with the hope that “like a morning star, these Nestorians shall arise to usher in a glorious and resplendent day.”<sup>110</sup> The plan was to arm the Nestorians “for the contest” so they could take over the missionary enterprise and proselytize among Muslims.

The missionaries’ denominational differences and hostility towards one another, engendered fierce competition over winning Nestorian souls.<sup>111</sup> Rival missions began to pull the Nestorian community in different directions, imparting to the mountaineers in the process the illusion that they had automatically secured the temporal protection of the imperial patrons of the Christian missionaries. The Jesuits of the Catholic mission had made forays into the area as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century. With some ebb and flow in their work, Catholic Propaganda had successfully managed to convert a number of the Nestorian communities of Mosul and Salmas to Catholicism. Those Nestorians recognizing the Pope were renamed Chaldeans and proclaimed a *millet* in the 1850s. The Syrian Orthodox Christians of Tur Abidin in the vicinity of Mardin, who were represented through the office of the Armenian patriarch in Istanbul, were known as Jacobites. The Christian mountaineers of Hakkari, however, had remained loyal to the Old Nestorian Church, further fueling the missionary engine over securing the allegiance of what they enthusiastically referred to as ‘independent’ mountain Nestorians.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Grant, *The Nestorians; or, The Lost Tribes*, 55.

<sup>111</sup> Grant, 47–48.

<sup>112</sup> Grant, 27–28.



The Americans spearheaded the competition by authorizing the physician Asahel Grant of the Urumia mission station to make his first trip of discovery into the mountains of Hakkari in 1839 with the aim of preemptively occupying that valuable field before their Catholic rivals did so. Revered for his profession as a physician, Dr. Grant, besides securing the good will of Mar Shimun, made easy alliances with the Kurdish *beys* of Hakkari and Bohtan, all with the object of boosting “our missionary prospects among the mountain Nestorians, and perhaps open a safe channel of communication between them and the station at Oroomiah.”<sup>113</sup> Having cured Nurallah Bey of Hakkari of his illness, Dr. Grant “became his greatest favourite.”<sup>114</sup> His zeal, evident in his exhilaration over his presumed ‘discovery’ of the lost ten tribes of Israel (he thought the Nestorians of Hakkari were the remnants of the lost Israelites mentioned in the bible), inadvertently led to the vexation of the already strained Kurdish-Christian relations. His rash decision to build a mission compound in Ashita, the largest village in the lower district of Tiyyari, during such turbulent times, has been frequently cited as one of the reasons for provoking the suspicions of the Kurds about foreign intervention in Kurdistan.

The fear of missionary intervention was compounded in light of the dependency of the hostile Ottoman forces on foreign support. The British aid to the restoration of Ottoman sovereignty over Syria lent much credence to the Kurdish fears of European intervention in their political affairs. Rumors circulated that the ‘Franks’ were coming to overtake Kurdistan through the medium of the Nestorians. Prior to Dr. Grant’s visit to Hakkari in 1839, a German scholar, namely Dr. Schultz, commissioned by the French

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<sup>113</sup> Grant, 87.

<sup>114</sup> Grant, 90.

Institute “to examine its stores of literary wonders”,<sup>115</sup> had been murdered by the Kurds at Bashkale by the order of Nurallah, the *bey* of Hakkari. Schultz was suspected of having discovered a gold mine, “and that he would cause an army to come and take possession of their country.”<sup>116</sup> The American doctor’s efforts to remove the suspicions about the castle-like mission compound in Ashita proved ostensibly satisfactory to ‘his old friend’, the *bey*, but there was too much at stake for Nurallah Bey’s concerns to have been allayed so easily.

Widespread political instability resulting from Ottoman and Qajar efforts to reduce the Kurdish *beyliks* had fractured durable alliances. Due south of Hakkari, the Ottoman *vali* of Mosul, Ince Bayraktar had foiled the efforts of Ismail Pasha of Behdinan to reestablish himself at his capital in Amadiya. In the course of Ismail Pasha’s attempt to liberate his capital from Ottoman military occupation, Ince Bayraktar’s warning to the patriarch to break rank with Ismail Pasha had proved effective in his defection. After receiving a cautionary note from the Pasha of Mosul to the effect that his support of the *bey* of Behdinan would be tantamount to declaring war against the Osmanlis, Mar Shimun had withdrawn his forces on the pretext of celebrating Easter and made his way back to Tiyyari. “Ismael Pasha never forgot this treachery.”<sup>117</sup> The betrayed and defeated Ismail Bey sought aid elsewhere at Jazira from the powerful Bedir Khan Bey.

Similarly, Mar Shimun’s relations with his ally in the Hakkari *beylik* had turned sour. Nurallah was in a precarious position. He had been forced to pledge allegiance to

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<sup>115</sup> Fraser, *Travels in Koordistan, Mesopotamia, &c, Including an Account of Parts of Those Countries Hitherto Unvisited by Europeans. With Sketches of the Character and Manners of the Koordish and Arab Tribes*, 62.

<sup>116</sup> Grant, *The Nestorians; or, The Lost Tribes*, 102.

<sup>117</sup> Badger and Neale, *The Nestorians and Their Rituals*, 265.

the Qajars after an expedition into Hakkari by the Amir-i Nizam of Azerbaijan.<sup>118</sup> His successful usurpation of the seat of the *beylik*, which legally belonged to his cousin, Sulayman Bey, may have sprung from the support of his Qajar patrons. However, when his rival cousin, Sulayman Bey, was recognized by the Porte as the *bey* of Julemerk, Nurallah had to accept the *fait accompli*, and compromise the political status of the *beylik* of Hakkari for equal recognition from the Porte. In the course of this succession struggle among the Kurdish dynasts, Mar Shimun had offered his support to the *bey*'s cousin, Sulayman Bey. As a result of the Porte's policy of divide and rule, Nurallah Bey's area of control had been reduced to the Bashkale district while his cousin became the chief of Julemerk.<sup>119</sup> This official government policy of dividing the Hakkari *beylik* caused a political rift, alerting the chiefs to renew or remake their alliances against the backdrop of "the extension of European influence, and the consequent changes occurring in the East."<sup>120</sup>

Moreover, Mar Shimun had breached the tradition of political hierarchy in the mountains of Hakkari by extending his religious authority into the political sphere. As the American missionary noted in his account of the causes behind the recent outbreak of hostilities in 1845, the patriarch's flight to the safety of Tiyyari from Julemerk, where he was under the close watch of Nurallah Bey, had placed the *bey* in a predicament. Mar Shimun had "excited the bitter hostility of many of his own people, by what they call his grasping at political power, claimed by none of his predecessors, but by the meleks

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<sup>118</sup> Fraser, *Travels in Koordistan, Mesopotamia, &c, Including an Account of Parts of Those Countries Hitherto Unvisited by Europeans. With Sketches of the Character and Manners of the Koordish and Arab Tribes*, 61.

<sup>119</sup> Grant, *The Nestorians; or, The Lost Tribes*, 104–5.

<sup>120</sup> Grant, 105.

only.”<sup>121</sup> Laurie argued that such a move by Mar Shimun augured ill for Nurallah’s already compromised rule, as the patriarch’s refuge among the defiant Tiyyari tribes, alarmed Nurallah, “whose very existence as Emir would have been endangered, had the Nestorians risen in political power and importance, as would have been the inevitable result of union under one supreme head.”<sup>122</sup>

Faced with such a turn of events, Nurallah had also decided to go against precedence and collect the *kharaj* tax from all the Nestorians of Tiyyari regardless of established custom. In reaction to the exertions of Nurallah, two *maliks* from the *ashirets* of Tiyyari, namely Shemasha Hinno of Lezan and Kashah Jindo of Salaberka, pressed Mar Shimun either to assist them in eliminating Nurallah or to support the claim of Suleiman Bey as the legitimate *bey* of Hakkari. Mar Shimun settled for the second option only to realize soon that the two *maliks* had betrayed his trust and pledged loyalty to Nurallah Bey. The Nestorian *maliks*’ defection had heartened the *bey* to move against Mar Shimun, who was lucky to escape with his life before Nurallah’s men torched his house in Kochanes in 1841.

Thus, in 1841, when the Kurdish *beys* were feeling the sting of the Ottoman *tanzimat*, the Nestorians’ political alliances and flirtation with the American and Anglican missionaries proved disastrous for their relations with their Kurdish allies. A refugee in Diz, Mar Shimun soon moved to Ashita, the largest village in lower Tiyyari, precisely where Dr. Grant had started to build the mission compound. Rumors were floating that the American doctor was erecting a castle in the Nestorian mountains. Meanwhile, the patriarch’s refusal to pay the requested *kharaj* was interpreted as breach

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<sup>121</sup> Kamal S. (Kamal Suleiman) Salibi and Yusuf Q. Khuri, *The Missionary Herald: Reports from Northern Iraq, 1833-1870*, vol. 1 (Amman, Jordan: Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies, 1997), 534.

<sup>122</sup> Salibi and Khuri, 1:534.

of allegiance and drove the politically desperate Nurallah to turn to Bedir Khan Bey at Jazira. By 1843, Ottoman forces had succeeded in shattering Behdinan *beylik* and weakening Hakkari, driving the *beys* of both *beyliks* to seek support at the court of Bedir Khan at Jazira. Thus, a formidable Kurdish coalition had emerged against a falsely emboldened Nestorian community even as the Nestorian *ashirets* were riven by internal dissension. The Bedir Khan-led Kurdish coalition had come to perceive the Nestorians as a fifth column in the Kurdish mountains, ready to act at the bid of a hostile Ottoman state and their European backers. Mar Shimun's correspondence with the *vali* of Mosul had only strengthened the belief of the Kurds in the Nestorians' connivance with the government.

Towards south of Tiyyari and Ashita, the country had fallen into a state of disorder in the wake of the collapse of the *beylik* of Behdinan. A skirmish between the Tiyyari Nestorians and the Berwari Kurds over pasture rights resulted in the murder and plunder of some Kurdish villages. This small and common incident in the tribal zone escalated into a massive communal strife as rumors were blown out of proportion that the Nestorians had desecrated mosques and murdered *seyyids* (descendants of the prophet).<sup>123</sup> The ambitious and politically shrewd Bedir Khan Bey of Bohtan seized the opportunity. Bedir Khan's durable resistance against the Ottomans and strict enforcement of law and order in his *beylik* had increased his reputation as a capable and pious leader bent on improving the Kurdish plight against the Ottoman *gavurs* and their 'infidel' British supporters. Bedir Khan appointed Zeynal Bey as the commander-in-chief of his army. As a Berwari Kurd from the fallen Behdinan *beylik*, Zeynal had a strong personal motive to

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<sup>123</sup> Aboona, *Assyrians, Kurds, and Ottomans*, 203.

avenge himself on the “treacherous” Nestorians in cahoots with the ‘Franks’ and the Ince Bayraktar of Mosul.

In May 1843, when the impenetrable peaks of Tiyaari were still covered in snow, the Kurdish troops stormed the districts of Diz and Tiyaari, massacring thousands of men, women, and children. Mar Shimun was able to escape to safety in Mosul, where he was offered protection by a native Anglican Nestorian, Rassam, who was acting as the British vice-consul in the city. One of the patriarch’s brothers along with his mother, however, were trapped and brutally slain. The bodies of the victims were mangled and thrown over the precipices into the Zab river. According to Grant, the corpses of the numerous slain Kurdish soldiers were also dumped into the river to prevent the Kurds from losing morale. Many more faced a similarly gruesome fate even as hundreds of women were also raped and dragged away as slaves. Not long after the settling of the roar of the atrocities, the terrorized Nestorians of Ashita revolted and laid siege to Dr. Grant’s half-finished mission compound, where Zeynal Bey had quartered his troops. The Kurdish general, however, was able to break the siege with the help of Bedir Khan. Upon the arrival of reinforcements, another vengeful killing spree broke out, sending hundreds more to death.

Bedir Khan Bey’s massacre of the mountain Nestorians occurred at the nexus of the Ottoman extension of state capacity into its peripheral geography, where the Kurdish *beys* put up a fierce resistance for political survival. As Hans Lukas Keiser and Donald Bloxham have noted, in this extremely violent civil war, which caused the loss of life of thousands in combat and from starvation and epidemics, Bedir Khan galvanized a Kurdish opposition movement that transcended “the local interests of individual tribal

chieftains.”<sup>124</sup> To stiffen the resistance against the Ottomans, the Kurdish prince called on both Armenian and Nestorian communities to join his campaigns against a state that had lost its legitimacy in a dramatic fashion in the last two decades through defeat by internal and external powers and engaging in widespread brutalities against its own Muslim subjects. His calls, however, had little effect on the Armenian communities who put their faith in the Ottoman promise of reforms as they continued to take the line from the Amira classes of Istanbul.

In the mountains of Hakkari, where Ottoman and Iranian encroachments had caused internal rifts in the political structure of the Kurdo-Christian *beylik* of Hakkari, the Nestorians decided to resist Kurdish overtures and threats and hold their ground, “seemingly encouraged in their actions by a belief that Western missionary interest in their Christian heritage would translate to great power intervention on their behalf.”<sup>125</sup> Their hopes were gravely misplaced, as Grant withdrew to the safety of Mosul and seemingly to avoid get implicated in political matters. Thus, despite Grant’s good intentions, his presence in the mountains was read unmistakably in political terms. The Kurds for the first time had coalesced into a formidable force against the Ottomans, who had little pretense to sovereignty in the wake of Ibrahim Pasha’s smashing victory against the sultan’s forces at Nizip in 1839. The fact that the Ottomans were only rescued by the British, following the Gülhane proclamations in favor of the Christians of the empire, became grounds for serious concern among a conservative public that the Ottoman state was bent on breaking the power of its Muslim subjects. Evidence of such concerns abound in mission accounts. In 1839, when the Ottoman army was routed by Ibrahim

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<sup>124</sup> Donald Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 40.

<sup>125</sup> Bloxham, 41.

Pasha at Nizip, Dr. Grant reported of Kurds' robbing the retreating Ottoman soldiers while the residents of Diyarbakir ascribed the defeat of the Ottoman army to "the European uniform and tactics of the *Nezam*," and expressed their rage "against all Europeans as the reputed cause of it."<sup>126</sup> According to Grant, the enraged inhabitants of the town intended "to kill all the Europeans in the place."<sup>127</sup>

Such passionate anti-European sentiments among the populous in southeastern Anatolia helped create an atmosphere in which the Kurdish *beys*' struggle for survival assumed a religious bent. The Ottoman proclamation of Hatt-i Şerif-i Gülhane, combined with a sudden upsurge in missionary activity rendered the Nestorians' insubordination an act of treason and a grave threat to the Kurdish resistance movement. At a time when the Kurdish dynasts faced an existential crisis, heightened missionary activity was bound to be interpreted as an extension of the European-inspired *tanzimat* through the medium of the Christian communities of the mountains of Hakkari.

In the light of the trauma of civil war and the ensuing devastation and widespread famine in the trail of violent Ottoman campaigns, a Kurdish communal solidarity emerged which was shrouded in a religious ethos. There could be little doubt that the communal bond had also been strengthened by the proliferation of the revitalized Naqshbandi-Khalidi, which was characterized by its emphasis on the application of the *shari'a* law and the *sunna* (traditions and practices associated with Prophet Muhammad). Strong support for Bedir Khan Bey's campaign, who had gained wide reputation as a pious Muslim ruler, could also be taken to attest to the Kurdish public's perception of the *bey* as the savior of Islam against a hostile secularizing Ottoman state.

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<sup>126</sup> Grant, *The Nestorians; or, The Lost Tribes*, 20.

<sup>127</sup> Grant, 20.



What, however, militates against the characterization of this Kurdish-Nestorian conflict as a sectarian discord is that only small parts of the Nestorian country was targeted, in which the other Nestorian tribes took part in alliance with the Kurdish coalition. As the relationship between the American missionaries and the Mar Shimun soured after the massacre, evidence emerged that the Nestorians took a prominent part in the massacres. The maliks of Jilu and Tkhuma and upper Tiyyari, who clashed with Mar Shimun over his attempts to seize the reins of political power, saw the war against their kinfolk as an opportunity to restore the traditional hierarchy of separation of religion and politics. It is safe to argue that the American, Anglican, and Catholic missionaries' rivalry over winning the allegiance of the patriarch, whom they saw as sole spiritual and temporal leader of all the 'independent mountain Nestorians', may have encouraged the patriarch in trying to occupy the position envisioned for him by the missionaries. But this went directly against tradition and the maliks were only happy that they could enlist Kurdish support in rectifying the situation.

Bedir Khan Bey's power at Jazira, as the last stronghold of Kurdish resistance in southeastern Anatolia, was finally broken in 1847 as Ottoman fears of international interference on behalf of the subjugated Christians spiked. Having finally brought Kurdistan under central control, Ottoman initiatives began to ensure the consolidation of the centralization process. Southeastern Anatolia was administratively reorganized to form the *eyalet* of Kurdistan, an obvious attempt on the part of the Porte to appease its alienated Kurdish subjects. With a short interval following the second conquest of Kurdistan in the late 1840s and the reorganization of the administrative provinces, joint Russian, British, Ottoman, and Persian border commissioners reappeared on the frontiers to legalize Ottoman and Iranian territorial possessions through cartographic means.

Situated in the very heartland of Kurdistan, the imperial 'shatter zone' was now to become a lengthy thorny legal issue with high stakes for all parties involved.

For the American missionaries who arrived in both Qajar Iran and the Ottoman empires in the 1830s, the 'shatter zone' was to present a special problem. The people the Americans had come to proselytize inhabited this porous frontier where legal structures paled before the tribal power dependent on the application of customary law. Before long, the American Protestant missionaries found themselves making tarns-border excursions across the frontiers into the tribal zone with its unfamiliar maze of traditional social networks. In the mountains of Hakkari, Kurds and Christians occupied an in-between space where religion only formed a tenuous link between co-religionists in the light of the more important social hierarchy making up the tribal society of the mountains. While they achieved a degree of success in the plains of Urumia, Diyarbakir, and Erzurum, in the mountains of Hakkari and Iranian Kurdistan their influence did not extend far. In the mountains, where semi-independent *ashirets* continued to exert their power, a predominantly fluid socio-political hierarchy was rooted in both customary law and religious affiliation. Thus, the border commissioner's appearance on the frontiers, a manifestation of modernity and civility in the eyes of the missionaries, complicated their position vis-à-vis their mission fields across the frontiers.

By contrast, from the perspective of the Kurdish tribes inhabiting the vast frontier, these border commissioners appeared as harbingers of restrictions upon their mobility involving trans-border movements in search of pasture. And this was non-negotiable. In the tribal zone, custom was law and everything that violated the locally recognized arrangements was an act of infringement meriting punishment. As the new imperial secular reforms ended a locally-upheld secular princely law in Kurdistan by the late 1840s, a new form of identity in the guise of Sufi orders emerged to bind the tribes

together under religious authority. This new form of identity found more opportunity to grow on the fringes of the empire where imperial writ was lax and local authority continued to command respect. Thus, by the time Sultan Abdul Hamid II took the throne in 1876, a new set of ecclesiastical power brokers had emerged in the Sufi orders to meet the demands of the day in a tribal country with ‘atomized’ socio-political structures in the form of smaller tribal formations. It was thus no anomaly in 1880, when an ambitious Kurdish sheikh, Sayyid Ubeydullah, inheriting his father’s immense reputation and patriarchal seat at Nawchia in Ottoman Hakkari, was able to look beyond the borders of the Ottoman empire and speak with confidence of protecting his Sunni Kurdish subjects in Iran.

## **Chapter 2: Sheikh Ubeydullah's Movement (1879-1881): Igniting sectarian strife**

Between 1879 and 1880, Sheikh Ubeydullah, the supreme religious leader of the reformed Naqshbandi-Khalidi Sufi *tariqa* (order), launched a series of revolts against the Ottoman Empire and the Iranian Qajar monarchy with the declared object of establishing an independently operating Kurdish political entity.<sup>128</sup> The movement failed to reach its leader's projected goal of creating Kurdish sovereignty over Iranian and Ottoman Kurdistan. However, the ramifications of the sheikh's campaigns, involving large-scale Sunni Kurdish tribal depredations and massacres of Shi'i subjects of Iran, were enormous. The Kurdish sheikh's aggression incited a violent backlash on the part of the Iranian state. The counter campaigns came in the form of state-licensed tribal regiments' indiscriminate pillage and massacre of Sunni Kurdish villagers and tribesmen across the plains south and west of Lake Urumia. This Kurdish Sunni invasion, followed by a Shi'i state's violent response, on a politicized frontier between rival Iranian, Ottoman, and Russian empires, laid the foundation for a new era of sectarian strife among the diverse ethno-religious communities of the region.

Sheikh Ubeydullah's aspirations for establishing a Sunni Kurdish political entity, the upshot of the revival of a politicized Naqshbandi Sufi order, brought the Kurds into collision with a weakened Qajar despot at the head of a decentralized empire undergoing a similar process of popular religious revival tinged with nationalism. The violent face-off fractured the relatively peaceful intercommunal dynamics governing the relations between the rival Muslim sects themselves and their Christian neighbors on the northern stretch of the Ottoman-Iranian frontiers. Centered around a disputed frontier under the

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<sup>128</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London ; Atlantic Highlands, N.J: Zed Books, 1992), 185.

contentious process of demarcation, the Kurdish campaigns and the excessively violent method of the Iranian state in putting down the insurrection marked the starting point of a drawn-out series of ethno-religious conflicts. These frictions assumed a more sectarian bent as the boundary-making process gave rise to the contentious and intertwined questions of subjecthood and loyalty, political representation, national territorial integrity, frontier security, all of which were constitutive of efforts to control land and human resources.

The initial signs of change in the intercommunal relations between the diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious populations of Ottoman Hakkari and Iranian Azerbaijan had surfaced in the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as Russia wrested control of the Caucasus from the Qajar and Ottoman empires. In the course of the campaigns of the early decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century over the Caucasus, the frontier Muslim and Christian communities displayed varied and ambivalent responses to their former overlords' and the newcomers' overtures to secure their loyalties.<sup>129</sup> As the century wore on and new imperial and local conflicts broke out, the loyalties of the heterogeneous frontier populations became politicized and subject to imperial state scrutiny.

The influx of the American Protestant missionaries to the region in the 1830s further complicated the issue of the frontier populations' political and sectarian loyalties. Driven by evangelical zeal, the American missionaries became locked in a fierce competition, with their Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox rivals, over the representation and protection of the Nestorian and Armenian communities of Hakkari and Urumia. Such rivalry over representation of the local Christian communities on the part of the foreign missions and their powerful imperial patrons highlighted the transgressive and

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<sup>129</sup> Dennis, "Explaining Coexistence," 100–117.

transformative impact attending an emerging global order marked by the elusive ideal of territory commensurate with ethno-religious identity. The missionaries were the pioneers in turning the question of representation into a religious one as they became intermediaries between the Christian communities of Iran and the Ottoman Empire and the great powers. Paralleling such missionary enterprises were Russia's and Britain's endeavors to demarcate the Ottoman-Iranian frontiers. Missionary work and imperial efforts together represented the fast-changing power dynamics and competition over control of resources, processes that became entangled with the issue of ethno-religious identity.

Amidst the widespread changes, evident in the massive reform projects of the Ottoman state to extend administrative control to the periphery, missionary activity, and the boundary-making project, the Kurdish communities' sociopolitical structure assumed a regressive course of atomization, leading to diminished indigenous representation. It is against this loss of Kurdish representation that Sheikh Ubeydullah's movement should be examined. From this perspective, Ubeydullah's rising between 1879-1881 signified a watershed in Kurdish history. The sheikh's uprising put forth a formidable native Kurdish attempt to reverse the trend of legal and political marginalization by seeking to restore representative agency to the divided tribal communities of Kurdistan. Moreover, its failure marked the beginning of a historical era during which sectarian politics would become the defining factor in shaping the intercommunal relations of the frontier populations in the context of Ottoman, Iranian, and great power rivalry.

The massive repercussions of the Kurdish sheikh's unsuccessful movement were more far-reaching than the event itself. While Sheikh Ubeydullah's campaigns under the banner of Sunni Islam momentarily succeeded in manufacturing a flimsy alliance among fissiparous tribal forces, the ensuing looting frenzy and widespread destruction and

massacre of Shi'i property and lives proved disastrous for the intercommunal relations among the region's diverse groups. Counter Shi'i *fatwas* against the Kurdish sheikhs' and muftis' calls for *jihad* reactivated chronic Shi'i-Sunni sectarian hostilities. What distinguished these conflicts as sectarian in the modern sense of the term, however, lay in their occurrence at the nexus of an emergent international state system that recognized ethnoreligious identity as *the* organizing principle for political sovereignty. In this new global state-centered system, rival empires formulated territorial claims on the basis of religious and ethnic identity of the frontier subjects as they sought to incorporate these communities into their modernizing imperial polities.

While imperial policy trended increasingly towards stressing religious affiliation as a marker of identity and political loyalty, the failure of Sheikh Ubeydullah's plan to secure great power backing for the Kurdish community spelled disaster for the Kurds and their Christian and Shi'i neighbors. In the wake of the failure of Ubeydullah's movement and the lack of any international acknowledgement of the Kurdish Question, the Kurdish frontier communities lost the opportunity to reconstitute a viable indigenous representative body. In stark contrast to the Kurdish case, their Christian neighbors, i.e., the Armenians, found strong advocacy of their religious and political rights in the American, British, and Russian missions and their respective governments. The formation of the Hamidiye Light Cavalry under the direct supervision of Sultan Abdülhamid II in the 1890s serves as a clear indication of the universal adoption of such policy of binding frontier subjects to the changing imperial state system via sectarian identities. As a result of the convergence of such divergent interests and trends, Kurds, Christians, and Azeris of the frontier region increasingly moved in the direction of identifying themselves through their religious affiliations to the states they perceived as capable of representing their communal rights. The Christians and Azeris received

official representation from their recognized imperial state patrons, leaving the Kurdish tribes of Iranian Azerbaijan and Hakkari in an isolated position with little representative power save for that offered by the Ottoman sultan. The sultan, in turn, sought to strengthen the Kurdish tribes' sectarian identity with the aim of binding them more firmly to the Ottoman state against the threat of Armenian irredentism. As a result, violence became the primary means of assertion of political power for the Kurds as Ottoman-Russian imperial rivalry over the allegiance of the frontier communities spiked, whereby sectarian ties to the Ottoman state pitted the underrepresented Kurdish tribes against the officially protected Christian and Azeri communities.

This chapter examines Sheikh Ubeydullah's movement and the backlash it provoked from the Iranian state within the context of the 19<sup>th</sup> century imperial reforms, an essential part of which consisted of endeavors to make the boundary. The overarching argument is that international intervention on behalf of Nestorian and Armenian Christians on the basis of confessional and national identity and affiliation of these communities was perceived by the Kurds as an existential threat. This perception prompted Sheikh Ubeydullah's movement for securing Kurdish representation, which was violently crushed by the Iranian state under the watch of an unsympathetic international community. The failure of the sheikh's movement, followed by the shattering of Kurdish prospects for representation, drove the Kurdish tribes into a cycle of intertribal violence and competition for control of land and resources at the expense of their Christian neighbors.

Thus, in brief, failed Ottoman and Qajar states' centralization efforts led to the violent suppression of Kurdish political leadership and representative bodies, and consequently to their replacement with shattered tribal structures. These shattered communities became increasingly drawn into a vicious cycle of intercommunal violence



as larger conflicting imperial interests further arrested the development of viable indigenous political representative bodies. The trend of increased political marginalization of the Kurdish community in the context of Ottoman, Russian, and Iranian imperial rivalry over the disputed frontiers and the increased representation of the less numerous Nestorian and Armenian Christians in the region ultimately produced what Ussama Makdisi has termed the ‘culture of sectarianism’. The absence of the Kurdish voice in the Ottoman, Iranian, and European circles, and the stereotypical reduction of the entire Kurdish community to that of wild tribesmen driven by predatory instincts served only to increase the sectarian ethos shrouding the intercommunal conflicts ravaging northwest Iran from 1880 until 1922.

#### **THE GEOGRAPHY AND THE PEOPLE:**

In 1514, at the Battle of Chaldiran, the Ottoman and Safavid Empires collided in northern Kurdistan and Armenia, at the intersection of a vast mountainous region stretching from the Caucasian mountain range as far south as the undulating hills abutting the Persian Gulf. The battle was decisive as the two Muslim imperial rivals settled for the mountain barrier as a natural frontier. The mountain ranges, however, were anything but a dividing line as the numerous valleys, foothills, and plains with their abundant water resources and isolated refuges were home to various peoples with a miscellany of religions, languages, professions, socio-political structures and loyalties. As James Scott has aptly described a similar situation in East Asia, the chosen frontier between the two states represented the classic example of the imperial shatter zone, “where human shards of state formation and rivalry accumulated willy nilly, creating regions of bewildering

ethnic and linguistic complexity.”<sup>130</sup> The more numerous Sunni Kurdish tribes, through the mediation of a prominent Kurdish statesman, Idris Bitlisi, secured the Ottoman sultans’ goodwill to retain their independent status as frontier guards. Thus, through Ottoman consent, the Sunni Kurds came to constitute a formidable bulwark against the Shi’i monarchs of Safavid Iran and other dynasties in the wake of the fall of the Safavid Empire in 1722. Following several centuries of switching hands between Iranian and Ottoman empires, this region finally came within the sphere of Russian influence in the 1800s as Russia gradually completed annexation of the Caucasian mountain range and plateaus. As the Russians came from the north, so did the British from the south and west, introducing the initial components of an emerging international state system. An important result of Russia’s entry into the scene was the gradual transformation of this centuries-long backwater into a backdoor. From the Caucasus, Russia could project its power into Qajar Iran and the Ottoman Empire.<sup>131</sup>

The collision point of Russian, Ottoman, and Iranian empires was inhabited by nomadic and settled Kurds and Nestorians, Armenian cultivators and craftsmen, Shi’i Azeri and Karapapakhs landlords and villagers. Settled Nestorian and a small portion of Armenians under the Qajar rule populated villages on the plains of Salmas, Urmia, and Solduz on the west side of Lake Urmia in the province of Azerbaijan. The region west of the lake is divided by low mountains that divide the separate the Urmia from Salmas in north and Solduz and Savujbulagh in the south. Multiple small rivers flow from the Kurdish mountains farther west, forming an alluvial plains rich in agricultural soil and produce, creating a stark contrast with the rest of arid climate of Azerbaijan. Urmia was

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<sup>130</sup> James C Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 7.

<sup>131</sup> Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*.

actually known as “the paradise of Persia” in the nineteenth century among Iranians and foreigners alike. Sunni, Shi’i, and Christian villages were scattered across the plains and worked the land as share-croppers for mostly Afshar, Karapapakh, and Kurdish landlords and notables. Salmas, situated northwest side of the lake, was more heavily populated by Armenian and Shi’i villagers. A Catholic mission had also infiltrated the region prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and had managed to convert some of the Nestorian villages such as Khorrova and Ula into Catholicism, and were thus known as Chaldeans. On the Urmia and Salmas plains, however, the Nestorians had retained their ties to the Old Church under the patriarchate of Kochanes across the frontier in Ottoman Hakkari. The Solduz plain was populated by Sunni, Shi’i, Armenian, and Nestorian villages under the care of Shi’i Karapapakh landlords, who had brought over from the Caucasus by the Qajar Crown Prince Abbas Mirza in the 1820s to protect the region against Kurdish raids from the mountains to the west. Further south was the district of Mukri, with its overwhelmingly Sunni Kurdish population around the small town of Savujbulagh.

North from Salmas, beyond the lake, the closest city was Khoi, after which the road bifurcated in the direction of two nearest political and cultural centers. To the east, the road from Salmas and Khoi led to Tabriz, which was the most populous and important economic and political center, rivaling and perhaps surpassing that of the Qajar capital of Tehran. Tabriz was renowned also for being the seat of the crown prince the Qajar dynasty (1794-1925), and, also being the provincial capital of Azerbaijan, the richest and most populous *ayalat* of the Qajar monarchy. From Tabriz and Khoi, roads led variously to Erzurum and Trabzon through Ottoman territory or to Tbilisi (Tiflis), Georgia, the Russian imperial center in the Caucasus in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From there, travelers could journey to Istanbul and Europe via the Black Sea. Tbilisi and later Baku were increasingly the destinations of Christian and Muslim workers and merchants who

sought work opportunities in the Caucasus. This was also the route taken by the American missionaries and foreign consuls to reach their places of residence in the province of Azerbaijan. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, since the Treaty of Turkmenchai in 1828 that ended the war between Qajar Iran and the tsar's troops, Russia projected power from the Caucasus until it eventually occupied Azerbaijan in 1911.<sup>132</sup>

On the west side of Salmas, Urmia, Solduz, and Mukri, the region becomes increasingly mountainous, with river valleys winding into the high plains of Vazneh, Ushnu, Mergawar, Tergawar, Baradost, Somai, and Kotur, which formed the porous frontier between Qajar Iran and the Ottoman Empire. Aside from the plains of Serai, Mahmudi, Norduz, and Nawchia (also known as Gawar and Shamdinan), these mountains continue to elevate up through Hakkari and the wider region beyond where the mountains gradually give way to the plains around Lake Van. The extreme heights of Hakkari with numerous impassable mountain peaks, deep gorges, and canyons, constitute the meeting point of two vast mountain ranges of the Middle East: the Zagros (which extend south to the Persian Gulf) and the Taurus (which separate Turkey's Mediterranean coast from Anatolia). There was an important social and political distinction between the populations of Hakkari and those of the Urmia plains. While on the plains, the inhabitants were settled cultivators, in the mountainous districts west of Lake Urmia and in Hakkari, the populations were mostly semi-independent *ashirets* (tribal confederations) that led a transhumant lifestyle, characterized by partly seasonal migrations in search of pasture for their flocks of sheep and partly agricultural activities. While Hakkari had remained autonomous for centuries under partial Ottoman rule and Kurdish dynasts, in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the inauguration of Ottoman-Iranian centralization drives

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<sup>132</sup> Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, 43–45.

(reflected in efforts to make the boundary), the region and its inhabitants came under pressure of transformative forces unleashed by encroaching states. As noted in the previous chapter, Hakkari had a mixed population of Christians and Muslim Kurds with shared socio-political structures and partially mixed villages and districts.<sup>133</sup>

By the year 1880, when Sheikh Ubeydullah led the Kurdish invasion from his mountain stronghold in Nawchia in the Ottoman province of Hakkari into Iranian Azerbaijan, the Ottoman empire had trekked an arduous course of administrative reforms since 1839. Known collectively as the *tanzimat*, these efforts at administrative restructuring were replicated in Qajar Iran, although on a much more limited scale. In this transition period, wide-ranging efforts were made by the Porte to incorporate the imperial *ancien regime* into the emergent global interstate system emanating from Europe. The core components of these reforms consisted of clearly demarcated boundaries to facilitate diplomatic and commercial relations and the institution of new codes of subjecthood, taxation, and conscription. Much of the Ottoman reform energy was, however, expended on reorganization of the military apparatus, which was used to centralize control in the peripheral parts of the empire. The equally important question of subjecthood received little practical attention, particularly in southeastern Anatolia, where an interpenetrating mix of Kurdish, Nestorian, and Armenian communities with divergent communal and political interests and gravitational pulls undermined the development of a consistent Ottoman administrative policy.

The *tanzimat* began cautiously and reluctantly on the heel of a disastrous war with Russia in 1828-29 and the occupation of Syria by Egyptian forces with the proclamation of the decree of Hatt-i Serif-i Gülhane (the Rose Garden Noble Script) in 1839. This

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<sup>133</sup> Becker, 46-47.

decree, recognizing the parity of Ottoman Christian subjects with their Muslim counterparts, meant to enlist British support in checking Russian aggression, which was relentlessly waged on the pretext of protecting the Orthodox Christian subjects of the sultan. To allay Muslim concerns about the Ottoman government's subordination to Christian powers, the decree was carefully crafted to convey the sense that it merely reinstated the Islamic tradition of the *millet* system. Following the Crimean War of 1853-56 with Russia, in which Britain and France rushed to the aid of the Ottomans, the Porte sought to reciprocate by issuing the decree of Hatt-i Humayun (the Royal Rescript). Reaffirming the rights of the sultan's Christian subjects, this second decree made no such pretenses of appealing to an Islamic rhetoric for legitimacy.<sup>134</sup>

The impact left by the decrees on the intercommunal relations of the subjects of the empire varied from place to place. The accomplishment of the primary object of the decrees, i.e., to stop Russian encroachments, however, remained elusive. Russian aggression continued unabated and Ottoman territorial hemorrhage went unhindered. At the end of each Ottoman war with Russia, a pattern developed whereby European powers intervened to reverse partial Ottoman territorial losses as they relinquished control of some. The Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78 dealt a final blow to Ottoman prestige and power as the empire lost most of its rich Christian possessions in the Balkans and certain strategic locales in the Caucasus. In response, Sultan Abdülhamid II ended the course of the *tanzimat* and used his autocratic power to ensure that his Muslim subjects, now in the majority, would gain privileged access to the benefits accruing from the institutional changes effected by his predecessors' reforms.

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<sup>134</sup> Abu-Manneh, "The Islamic Roots of the Gülhane Rescript," 195–200.

For the American missionaries who arrived in both Qajar Iran and the Ottoman empires in the 1830s, the 'shatter zone' was to present a special problem. The people the Americans had come to proselytize inhabited this porous frontier where state laws were subordinated to the tribal power and the feud and vendetta system of controlled violence to maintain order.<sup>135</sup> Starting in 1839, the American Protestant missionaries found themselves making trans-border excursions across the frontiers into the tribal zone with its unfamiliar maze of traditional social networks. In the mountains of Hakkari, Kurdish and Nestorian tribes alike stressed their religious identity but religion could never be reduced to a stable and well-defined form separate from family, village, and tribal contexts. In fact, religion only formed a tenuous link among co-religionists before more important traits such as social standing, title, and prestige. Respect for men of rank and power cut across religious lines as powerful chiefs, regardless of their religious distinction, were appealed to for arbitration in feuds which were frequent in the tribal zone.<sup>136</sup> While the missionaries achieved a degree of success in the plains of Urumia, Diyarbakir, and Erzurum, in the mountains of Hakkari and Iranian Kurdistan their influence did not extend far.

As state penetration of the periphery gradually increased, however, the mountains became the site of more visitors such as the joint border commissioners who had arrived to separate the mountainous range on paper maps just as the missionaries had arrived to separate the communities on spiritual grounds. From the perspective of the Kurdish tribes inhabiting the vast Ottoman-Iranian frontier, the border commissioners constituted harbingers of restrictions upon their mobility and trans-border migrations in search of pasture and plunder. The process was drawn out over decades with fluctuations in state

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<sup>135</sup> Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, 47.

<sup>136</sup> Makdisi, "Fantasies of the Possible," 79–80.

and tribal power, creating enormous ambiguities for the highlanders as the frequency of the visits variously increased opportunities and competing sources of authority, reflected in missionaries, foreign consuls, and travelers. Gradually, as the new imperial reforms made their impression on the socio-political landscape of the Hakkari mountains, new forms of identity in the guise of Sufi sheikhs and itinerant native missionaries (educated by the Americans) emerged to bring the discordant tribes together under the authority of religious institutions such as *tekkes* and mission seminaries.

In the case of the Kurdish tribes, the new form of religious identity found a better opportunity to grow on the fringes of the empire where imperial writ was lax and local authority continued to command respect. Thus, by the time Sultan Abdülhamid II took the throne in 1876, a new set of ecclesiastical power brokers had emerged in the Naqshbandi orders to meet the demands of the day in a tribal country riven by incessant intertribal competition and warfare over resources. In light of the developments, which will be discussed below, it was not an anomaly in 1880, when an ambitious Sheikh Ubeydullah was able to look beyond the borders of the Ottoman empire and speak with confidence about protecting his Sunni Kurdish followers in Iran.

#### **THE NAQSHBANDI SUFI *TARIQA* IN KURDISTAN AND THE RISE OF SHEIKH UBEYDULLAH TO PROMINENCE:**

Sheikh Ubeydullah's rise to fame was anything but a coincidence. He was born into a prominent Naqshbandi-Khalidi sheikhly family in the 1830s. His father, Sheikh Taha of Nehri, was one of the most prominent sheikhs of the reformed Naqshbandi *tariqa* (order) in Kurdistan, commanding respect in as wide-ranging places as the Caucasus in the north, Mesopotamia and Syria in the south and west, and Savujbulagh and Sine across the frontier in Iranian Kurdistan in the southeast. The history of the resurgence of the



Naqshbandi *tariqa*, and its renewed emphasis on *shari'a*-abidance helps illustrate the rising power of the Naqshbandi sheikhs in general and that of Ubeydullah's family in particular.

While long present in the Ottoman domains, the Naqshabndi underwent a radical transformation and revival in the early decades of the nineteenth century, sweeping Kurdistan precisely at the time when the authority of the Kurdish *beyliks* was in sharp decline. As Russian encroachments on Ottoman and Iranian territories brought the Qajar and Ottoman governments to the frontiers of their imperial domains, the princely political system in Kurdistan began to experience renewed turbulence in the form of family succession struggles.

The evident decline of Muslim supremacy vis-à-vis western powers had triggered a series of reform movements across the Islamic world. In India, by dint of British superiority at the expense of Muslim sovereignty, the Naqshbandi *tariqa* had undergone a process of reform and renewal. In keeping with the long-standing tradition of reforming Islam from within to stave off challenges, 16<sup>th</sup> century Naqshbandi scholars such as Ahmad Sirhindi had begun to highlight the primacy of *shari'a*-abidance as the distinguishing feature of the Naqshbandi order. With Russia gaining increased advantages within the Ottoman domains, especially in the regions adjacent to the Caucasus, and the revival of a hostile Shi'i Qajar monarchy in Iran, the religious milieu of Kurdistan across a politically volatile frontier, was bound to experience similar stirrings. Thus, it was no surprise that a cleric from southern Kurdistan would shake up the complacency of his contemporary religious establishment.

In 1808, a *mullah*, namely Abu al-Baha' Dhiy'a al-Din Khalid, hailing from the Kurdish Jaf tribe of the frontier district of Shahrazur in southern Kurdistan (today

Sulaymaniyya province in Iraqi Kurdistan), went on pilgrimage to Mecca.<sup>137</sup> His trip would become a discovery journey of faith, leading him to India, where he would be initiated into the Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi *tariqa* by Shah Abdullah Dihlawi.<sup>138</sup> Upon returning to Sulaymaniyya, Mawlana Khalid, as he soon became popularly and honorifically known, swiftly launched a vigorous missionary enterprise to propagate the teachings of the Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi. He set out with effecting internal reforms. In what soon eponymously became known as the Naqshbandi-Khalidi *tariqa*, Sheikh Khalid replaced the old restrictive initiation process associated with the rival Qadiri order with a more permissive and pragmatic practice of conferring *ijaza* (scholarly certificate and spiritual authority) upon numerous non-relatives. Furthermore, in a radical recasting of the order, Khalid gave primacy to the practice of *rabita*, i.e., the maintenance of “a constant awareness of the physical form of [his person] by means of prescribed techniques,” relegating the *tariqa*’s distinguishing feature of silent *dhikr* (recollection of God) to a secondary status.<sup>139</sup> This step proved a conscious effort on the part of the Kurdish sheikh to ensure the emergence of a centralized leadership under his person as the only legitimate object of *rabita*.<sup>140</sup>

Thus, before long, many sheikhs across Kurdistan, who were inspired by the example of Khalid, defected from the Qadiri camp and pledged commitment to the revived Naqshbandi *tariqa*. According to Foley, the astonishing success of Khalid’s

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<sup>137</sup> Abu-Manneh, “The Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya in the Ottoman Lands in the Early 19th Century,” 2–4. See also, Mahindukht Mutamidi’s *Naqshī az Mawlānā Khālid Naqshbandī va payrawān-i ʿarīqat-i ū.*, 20–21.

<sup>138</sup> Hamid Algar, “The Naqshbandī Order: A Preliminary Survey of Its History and Significance,” *Studia Islamica*, no. 44 (1976): 147–48. See also Mohammad Kalhur’s *Justārī pīrāmūn-i junbish-i Shaykh ‘Ubayd Allāh Shamdīnī 1297 Q, 1880 M: bih inẓimām-i (Risālah-’i Iftitāh-i Nāṣirī)*, 12–13.

<sup>139</sup> Ayla Esen Algar, *The Dervish Lodge: Architecture, Art, and Sufism in Ottoman Turkey* (University of California Press, 1992), 213.

<sup>140</sup> Algar, 218.

movement stemmed from its flexibility “to address the differing social and political needs of various communities simultaneously— from bringing greater equality to Shahrazur’s merchants to providing a viable alternative to Salafism and Wahhabism to Baghdadis.”<sup>141</sup> These converts and the newly authorized sheikhs proceeded to ordain *khalifas* (deputies) on an unprecedented scale. Evidently, Khalid’s freeing of the order from its hereditary restrictions, combined with his charisma and missionary zeal, exerted a strong appeal in the Kurdish society as the movement grew like wild fire. As it followed, Khalid’s “acute sense of mission” and his dispatching of “a large number of *khalifas* to carefully chosen destinations... helped create for the first time in the *tariqa*’s history an extensive Naqshbandi presence throughout Anatolia, and, to a lesser extent, in the Balkans and the Arab lands.”<sup>142</sup> Even after Khalid’s death in 1823, the Naqshbandi-Khalidi continued to grow by leaps and bounds. Martin van Bruinessen notes that the broken socio-economic and political situation of Kurdistan in the wake of the breakup of the princely authority and the increased penetration of Russian, British, and Ottoman imperialism, provided ripe conditions for the reformed order’s “autonomous growth.”<sup>143</sup>

Scholarship on the Naqshbandi *tariqa* has depicted the historical trajectory of the order as a “determined effort to influence the life and thought of the ruling classes and to bring the state closer to religion.”<sup>144</sup> Veritably, the political volatility of Khalid’s time, characterized by Iranian encroachments on the Baban emirate, a series of devastating Russo-Iranian wars, and a heightened Ottoman-Iranian rivalry increased the appeal of the more orthodox Naqshbandi-Khalidi *tariqa* among the ruling classes of Kurdistan. Amidst

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<sup>141</sup> Sean Ezra Foley, “Shaykh Khalid and the Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya, 1776-2005” 2005, 127.

<sup>142</sup> Dina Le Gall, *A Culture of Sufism: Naqshbandīs in the Ottoman World, 1450-1700* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 64–65.

<sup>143</sup> Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, 225.

<sup>144</sup> Dina Le Gall, “Forgotten Naqshbandīs and the Culture of Pre-Modern Sufi Brotherhoods,” *Studia Islamica*, no. 97 (2003): 91.

political struggle for survival, it appears that the Kurdish *beys* were drawn into the initial jockeying between the Naqshbandis and the Qadiris as they sought to reaffirm their declining legitimacy on account of sheikhly influence. For instance, when the rival Qadiri sheikhs forced Khalid into exile in Baghdad, Mahmud Pasha of Sulaymaniyya rushed to the Mamluk capital, in 1813, in order to persuade the revered sheikh to return. The charismatic sheikh's advocacy of the strict laws of the *sharia*, which had earned him much political prestige in such turbulent times, could not have been lost on the Kurdish *beys* who desperately sought to augment their diminished sources of legitimacy.<sup>145</sup>

From Sulaymaniyya, in southern Kurdistan, the movement spread quickly northward, entrenching itself in the *beyliks* of Behdinan, Bohtan, and Hakkari. According to Martin van Bruinessen, the evangelical activities of American missionaries of Urumia among the Nestorian and Armenian Christians of Hakkari, Mosul, Tur Abidin, and Urumia can be considered an additional factor in driving this rapid expansion.<sup>146</sup> Dr. Ross' report on K r Muhammad Pasha's father becoming a Suf  also suggests that the Naqshbandi-Khalidi *tariqa* was exerting appeal within the high-ranking circles of the Kurdish nobility. As permissive and unsubstantiated as the evidence remains, K r Muhammad's renown for piety and the strict application of the *sharia*-based tradition of cutting hands for theft may also be said to have been inspired by the teachings of the Naqshbandi sheikhs. Moreover, in the 1840s, in connection with the Kurdish-Nestorian hostilities, Badger reports on two sheikhs acting as emissaries to negotiate a settlement between Nurallah Bey of Hakkari and Mar Shimun.<sup>147</sup> This report is important in attesting to the Naqshbandi sheikhs' assumption of mediatory functions in political

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<sup>145</sup> Foley, "Shaykh Khalid and the Naqshbandyya-Khalidiyya, 1776-2005," 115–16.

<sup>146</sup> Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, 228–29.

<sup>147</sup> Badger and Neale, *The Nestorians and Their Rituals*, 242.

conflicts. Furthermore, excerpts from the Missionary Herald also reference the outstanding stature of a powerful sheikh who alerts the Americans to the infidelity of the Shi'is and the righteousness of the Sunni sect of Islam. Finally, after the massacre of the Nestorians in 1843, Henry Austin Layard, the British archeologist and later ambassador at Constantinople, put down the blame for the massacres to the provocations of a Sheikh Tahar. Even though this piece of evidence is unsubstantiated, the fact that Layard mentions a sheikh and not a *mullah* or *mufti*, as earlier in the case of the massacre of the Yezidis by the Pasha of Ravanduz, again may be taken as evidence substantiating the meteoric rise of the political power of the Naqshbandi-Khalidi sheikhs.

As illustrated by Bruinessen, the rapid rise to prominence of the Naqshbandi-Khalidi sheikhs of Kurdistan, to a large degree, stemmed from the socio-political conditions induced by the *tanzimat* era. Sabri Ateş has added some nuance to the picture by drawing attention to the question of the internationalization of the Iranian-Ottoman boundary-making process.<sup>148</sup> During this period, in the absence of princely authority and security, the intermediary role of the sheikhs as arbiters of conflict in tribal feuds, especially in frontier districts, became more prominent. The Ottoman *tanzimat* reforms had effectively closed the chapter on the secular princely reign, where orthodox and heterodox Muslim and non-Muslim groups maintained delicately-interwoven communal ties in a world predominantly characterized by orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy.

In the vacuum left by the centralization drive, administrative chaos manifested early in the tribal zone in the form of ceaseless intertribal warfare and raids against the cultivating populations of the plains, such as those of Urumia and Solduz in Iranian Azerbaijan. With abundant blood feuds to resolve, the more orthodox and politically

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<sup>148</sup> Ateş, *The Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands*, 2013.

engaged Kurdish sheikhs were now poised to monopolize the secular and juridical functions previously assumed by the *beys*. In return for performing such urgent tasks, which they successfully accomplished on account of their non-tribal affiliations, the Naqshbandi sheikhs' *tekkes* (Sufi monasteries) were flooded with gifts from numerous disciples and litigants. And as the sheikhs' wealth increased, so did their political representative powers among the tribes and between state and tribe.

Among other significant material gains accrued to the sheikhs as arbiters of conflict were land grants. Thanks to their swelling reputation, which put them in a convenient position between the state and their tribal constituency, the sheikhs became the prime beneficiaries of the Ottoman declaration of the Land Code of 1858. Thus, in addition to accumulating land endowments in the form of *waqf* (land grants allocated to the upkeep of religious sites), the sheikhly families also succeeded in registering vast land plots in their names.<sup>149</sup> The revenues generated from land and material gifts were extremely important in furthering a sheikh's reputation, which depended heavily on the scope of his hospitality to receive visitors and litigants. As Bruinessen has illustrated, the mediating function of the sheikhs became highly indispensable in the more densely populated tribal zones, particularly in the mountainous frontier districts where the frequency of cross-border tribal raids and skirmishes called for the indigenous representation provided by sheikhs.<sup>150</sup>

An exemplary case elucidating the significance of topography and geopolitics in facilitating the emergence of powerful Naqshbandi-Khalidi elites is best demonstrated by Sheikh Taha, the father of Sheikh Ubeydullah. Taha's strategically-situated *tekke* in the district of Nawchia, where a mixed population of Kurds, Armenians, and Nestorians lived

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<sup>149</sup> Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, 233.

<sup>150</sup> Bruinessen, 230–35.

just inside Ottoman territory on the frontier between Iran and in the proximity of the Russian Caucasus, complemented his patrimony as a Naqshbandi-Khalidi sheikh. Taha's widespread influence across the frontier, besides attracting the attention of the American missionary pioneers, placed the sheikh in favor with Muhammad Shah of Iran. As early as August 1841, the American missionary physician, Dr. Wright, accompanying Prince Malek Kasem Mirza to Mergawar, one of the Kurdish districts west of Urumia in Qajar territory, described his encounter with Sheikh Taha as follows:

Another reason for the trip just at that time was to see a celebrated Koordish sheikh, who had come down to Mergawar on some business of his own from central Koordistan. As soon as the prince entered upon the plain of Mergawar, he took his course towards the sheikh's tent, to make his respects to him before going to his own quarters. This sheikh is venerated throughout the whole region occupied by the Koords. His name is loved and honored. It is said that he has unbounded influence over all the Koordish tribes, and fame gives him credit for exerting his influence for good. He dissuades his wild and savage people from plunder, from blood, from war. His reputation for sanctity is very great, and the Koords regard him as a man of God in a high sense. They believe that God makes known his will to him, and that he is a prophet, sent of God, to make known the divine will to men.... Having such a reputation for sanctity and wisdom, the sick resort to him for healing, the ignorant for knowledge, the perplexed for a solution of their difficulties, the injured for reparation. No where, but in a country where the minds of men are dark with superstition and ignorance, can one man gain such power over the minds of others, both in temporal and spiritual things.<sup>151</sup>

The Ottoman sheikh's sway over Iranian Sunni subjects of the shah in the districts of Urumia, Savujbulagh, and Sinne, seems to have encouraged the Qajar king to secure the sheikh's goodwill through the customary practice of bestowing royal favors. The alliance between the sheikh and the shah was consolidated through marriage during the Crown Prince Abbas Mirza's reign in Azerbaijan. In the first half of the nineteenth century when Ottoman *beyliks* dominated the frontier districts, on the Iranian side of the

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<sup>151</sup> The Missionary Herald, Vol. 39 for the year 1841. Urumia, 16 August 1841. From Wright to Anderson, 63.

imperial marches, Kurdish princely rule was also commonplace. The Kurdish prince of the Salmas district, Yahya Khan, also linked to the Qajar court through marital ties, kept guard at the Chahriq castle, in the vicinity of Nawchia. Evidence is scanty to substantiate the nature of the relationship between Nurallah Bey of Hakkari and Yahya Khan, but missionary accounts point to the existence of a close relationship between the two Kurdish hereditary emirates as Nurallah frequently visited Yaka Khan to seek counsel when his hereditary rule was endangered by the Ottoman centralization drive.<sup>152</sup>

It appears that this influence was mutual as the shah had established marital ties with both Sheikh Taha and Yahya Khan. Mohammad Shah's consideration of the Kurdish power in the frontier district of Salmas in Iran and Gawar in the Ottoman Empire was clear in his proclivity to keep Yahya Khan's side in a dispute between this Kurdish khan and the governor of Urumia. Similarly, the shah conferred royal favors upon Taha's *tekke* in the form of regular contributions and endowing the sheikh's lodge with several villages in the Iranian district of Mergawar as *tuyul* (tax-farming).<sup>153</sup> This land grant ironically coincided with the British and Russian endeavors to demarcate the boundary between the domains of the two Muslim powers. Thus, as it would become clear, this royal gift, on a frontier undergoing the process of delimitation, would eventually create a massively contentious issue. Dispute over the ownership of the villages of Mergawar not only would provide one of the primary causes for the invasion of Iranian Azerbaijan by Sheikh Taha's son, Ubeydullah, but it would continue to form the basis for a series of lingering claims on the agenda of his grandsons and great grandsons, Sheikh Siddiq and Sheikh Taha II, respectively.

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<sup>152</sup> Montagu Gilbert Gerard, "Notes of a Journey through Kurdistan in the Winter of 1881-82." [4v] (8/56), 23. Also see Ghulam Husayn's *Afzal al-Tavarikh* for details of this marital alliance, pp. 109-110.

<sup>153</sup> Mirza Rashid Adib al-Shu'ara, *Tarikh-i Afshar*. (Riza'iyah: Shura-yi markazi-yi jashn-ha, 1967), 529.



Prior to the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, which changed everything in the region through the raising of the thorny Armenian Question, Sheikh Taha and his brother, Sheikh Salih, who succeeded him, eschewed from overt involvement in politics even as rapid changes engulfed the environs of their country in Kurdistan and beyond in the imperial centers of Iran, Russia, and the Ottoman empire. However, Taha's intelligent and highly ambitious son, Sheikh Ubeydullah, the beneficiary of the religious charisma and material wealth of his father and uncle, would not confine his actions to preaching and patching conflicts. His moment for a dramatic show of Kurdish force against the Qajars and the Ottomans would come in the aftermath of the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78. Ubeydullah's participation in the war, of which he kept a record in his collection of poetry on the history of the Naqshbandi *tariqa*, *Tuhfat al-Ahbab*, provides intimate evidence of the thought processes and the worldview of a Kurdish sheikh steeped in the teachings of the Naqshbandi movement unleashed by Mawlana Khalid at the dawn of the nineteenth century.

In the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, the Ottoman Empire, having gone through decades of administrative reform in order to get a new lease on life, was once again dragged into war against its archenemy. The Muslim power's defeat was clear and total. The Caucasian battlefronts, centered at the *vilayet* of Erzurum, left a desolate landscape in their wake, with famine ravaging the region. The result was further desolation of the already depleted agricultural resources and the diminished regional trade owing to the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the increased effectiveness of the Russian route through Georgia.<sup>154</sup> The Porte's humiliation and utter loss of prestige, an important

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<sup>154</sup> Charles Issawi, "The Tabriz-Trabzon Trade, 1830-1900: Rise and Decline of a Route," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 1, no. 1 (1970): 22.

deterrent against tribal disloyalty in the marches, was not lost on the tribally organized populations of Kurdistan.

Moreover, the Porte's further cession of territory in the Balkans and the Caucasus, led to the flooding of Anatolia with Muslim immigrants and minor officials seeking resettlement and employment. The refugee crisis, combined with the traumatic results of the war and the imposition of the Treaty of San Stefano by Russia dramatically increased the sense of alienation among the frontier Kurds. If the breakdown of princely authority was the first major shock to Kurdish sociopolitical structures and the Kurdish-Christian intercommunal relations, the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, in which the Kurds and Armenians bore the brunt of the wreckage, planted doubts in the minds of the Kurdish elite about the viability and legitimacy of continued Ottoman rule over Kurdistan.

The Russo-Turkish war was fought on a religious pretext in Anatolia, and was thus bound, as it did, to pull in the Kurds in large numbers under the banner of defense of Islam. Originally, the new Sultan Abdülhamid II's reputation for piety and ostensible opposition to the secular *tanzimat* reforms was received as good tidings among the religious authorities in Kurdistan, and by Sheikh Ubeydullah, in particular.<sup>155</sup> Under the command of their beloved sheikh, the Kurds, responded to the call of *jihad* against the Russian *gavurs* (pagans).<sup>156</sup> In an effort to appeal to the faith of his Muslim subjects, Abdülhamid II had restored the relegated significance of the office of the caliphate by styling himself as the caliph of the faithful.

Notwithstanding such measures by the sultan and the Porte, Sheikh Ubeydullah was dismayed by what he described as the utter irreligiosity and corruption of the Turkish

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<sup>155</sup> Nahri, Ubayd Allah, *Tuhfat al-ahbāb, yā, Maṣnavī-i Shaykh 'Ubayd Ilāh Nahrī*, ed. Sayyid Islam Duagu (Urūmīyah: Intishārāt-i Ḥusaynī, 2000), 114.

<sup>156</sup> Nahri, Ubayd Allah, 107–8.

officers and commandment. The Turkish military commandment's corruption appeared to stand in sharp contrast to the sheikh's "pious and brave Kurdish warriors."<sup>157</sup> Ubeydullah's "gallant Kurdish army" led the Turkish assault across the frontier in the capture of Erivan and the siege of Beyazit, both of which the sheikh chalked up as commendable contribution to the war effort. In return, when his men were denied provisions, he bade them to abandon the battle fields in droves.

Sheikh Ubeydullah returned to his home in Nawchia emboldened and confident of his prestige and powerful influence among the Kurds. The first in order of business was to petition the sultan for a reward in return for his assistance with the Ottoman war effort. Facing evasive responses and a menacing Armenian Question, which had been raised by European powers with much fanfare, the sheikh resolved to take matters into his own hands if his Kurdish followers were to enjoy a modicum of security, prosperity, and political representation. Thus, Ubeydullah pled to the sultan to recognize his paramountcy over the district of Hakkari. The sheikh offered to pay a larger tribute than that extended by his predecessor, Bedir Khan Bey of Bohtan, "if his authority over Kurdistan is recognized, and his rule is not interfered with."<sup>158</sup> Presented to the sultan prior to the war, the demand for self-rule proved even more pressing as the Armenian Question was catapulted onto the international diplomatic scene, sending shudders down the spine of the Ottoman governing elite in Istanbul.

#### **SHEIKH UBEYDULLAH'S MOVEMENT AND THE ARMENIAN QUESTION:**

Sheikh Ubeydullah's rise to religious and political prominence in the southeastern Anatolian province of Van came to the notice of the British in the wake of

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<sup>157</sup> Nahri, Ubayd Allah, 119.

<sup>158</sup> Vice-Consul Clayton to Major Trotter. No. 7. Bashkala, July 11, 1880. Turkey, No. 5. (1881). Correspondence respecting the Kurdish Invasion of Persia, p. 7.

the war of 1877-78 with the emergence of the Armenian Question. Since the Crimean War (1853-56), the Armenian communities of Anatolia had undergone a dramatic transformation. Their cultural and religious revival resulted in the gradual formation of the Armenian national consciousness or 'Armenianism' as identified by the American missionaries.<sup>159</sup> In this sense, the second half of the nineteenth century stood in sharp contrast to earlier periods when Armenians either ruled over isolated strongholds such as that of Zeitoun and Akhtamar or occupied a largely subservient status under Kurdish *beys*. Thanks to British pressure on the Porte to promulgate the Hatt-i Humayun rescript, space opened up for the Armenians' proactive initiatives to ameliorate their poor economic and political circumstances.

While divergent and geographically dispersed Armenian communities had for long maintained trade networks in the Old World, as the nineteenth century progressed, the Armenian peasant communities also found opportunities for trade and interaction with the outside world. The impact of the extensive American and Catholic missionary enterprises combined with the relatively more liberal environment of the Caucasian Armenian communities and expatriate Armenians in Europe to establish and expand cultural and educational institutions among the peasant classes of southeastern Anatolia.<sup>160</sup> The upshot of this sociocultural transformation was the ascendancy of the southeastern Anatolian Armenians to leadership in the form of occupation of office of the patriarchate of Istanbul. The Armenian patriarchate of Istanbul had hitherto remained the

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<sup>159</sup> American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, *The Missionary Herald*, vol. 72 (Published for the Board by Samuel T. Armstrong, 1876), 162.

<sup>160</sup> Robert F. Zeidner, "Britain and the Launching of the Armenian Question," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 7, no. 4 (1976): 472.

preserve of the *amira* class, who elected a catholicos to represent their exclusive class interests.<sup>161</sup>

The subversion of the Armenian socio-religious hierarchical order in favor of the rising class of traders in Anatolia and the *esnaf* elsewhere in the empire led to the loss of Ottoman control over the Armenian communities of Anatolia. Thus far, the Ottomans had managed to effectively rule their Christian minorities as part of the *millet* system through the office of the patriarchate in Istanbul. By the 1860s, the swelling Armenian national consciousness brought about the end of the Ottoman conception of the *millet*, paving the way for the emergence of a national *millet* (nation). This radical change was reflected in the inauguration of the first Armenian Constitutional representative assembly in 1863.

In the period of Ottoman state transition and Armenian communal transformation, the Porte's attempts to establish a compromised equilibrium among the southeastern Anatolian populations led to an impasse. The stalemate stemmed largely from the Porte's inability to develop a consistent policy for the incorporation of the Anatolian populations into the reforming imperial system. Competing Ottoman visions of reform and progress clashed, thus stunting positive developments. On one hand, a sector of administrators favored the establishment of a balance of power between Kurdish and Christian inhabitants of Anatolia. On the other hand, there were a number of administrators, who, taking the lead from the British officials, pushed for more Christian rights regardless of the practicality of such policy in resolving the Kurdish-Armenian intercommunal conflicts.

The attempts to reform at a fast pace without taking into consideration the facts on the ground were generally driven by the concern to remove all excuses for further

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<sup>161</sup> Harry Jewell Sarkiss, "The Armenian Renaissance, 1500-1863," *The Journal of Modern History* 9, no. 4 (1937): 447.

Russian aggression and to satisfy the pro-Armenian European public opinion. Consequently, “promised reforms took too long to fulfill, thus raising expectations of both local Christians and Muslims beyond the capability of the Ottoman state administrators to satisfy.”<sup>162</sup> Ottoman administrative incapacitation, combined with re-tribalization of Kurdistan, led the underrepresented Muslim Kurdish society to slide into a strong current of intertribal violence. The vengeance informing tribal feuds eventually turned against the thriving Armenian communities when the other political factors came into play.

The economic strain on the Porte’s resources, as the Ottoman reforming elite sought to expedite the process of infrastructural change, ultimately led to bankruptcy, the sting of which affected largely the poorer classes of the empire.<sup>163</sup> As the adverse impact of the failed reform movement deepened, intercommunal relations worsened, leading the impoverished Muslim subjects to perceive local Christians and their Great Power protectors as accomplices in causing their fortunes to decline. In May 1877, on the eve of the Russo-Turkish war, an American missionary provided a characteristic description of the unstable situation of the empire. He wrote:

The condition of the great body of the people in the Turkish empire is rapidly becoming one of the greatest wretchedness. Actual war could add but little, save in the loss of life, to the misery now resulting from the prostration of business, the uncertainties of the future, the depreciated currency, and the crushing taxation on all classes, in this struggle for existence on the part of the Turkish government. Demoralization and anarchy everywhere seem imminent.<sup>164</sup>

The war would indeed deal the final blow to the Kurdish-Armenian intercommunal relations. The Porte was beset by a series of economic crises and the outbreak of the war

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<sup>162</sup> Dennis, “Explaining Coexistence and Conflict in Eastern Anatolia, 1800-1878,” 199.

<sup>163</sup> American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, *The Missionary Herald*, 72:59.

<sup>164</sup> American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 72:141.

totally overwhelmed the Ottoman administrators as they were forced to coerce revenue out of an already over-taxed population. Large-scale conscription drives and movement of troops and the endemic disorganization went along with entrenched corruption in the military to wreak havoc on the populace. Exacerbated conditions were reported everywhere in southeastern Anatolia. “There has been no time during our twenty years’ residence in Turkey when it has been so unsafe traveling as during the present year,” another American missionary complained.<sup>165</sup>

Shortly before the war broke out, an arson in the Armenian business district of Van presented alarming evidence of the simmering intercommunal animosities that would descend into brutal sectarian strife during the war. Several missionary letters attest to the low ebb in the intercommunal relations as underfed Ottoman conscripts pillaged Armenian towns and villages across the southeastern Anatolian countryside in search of food. The correspondence also points to the growing trend of impoverished Kurdish nomads’ resorting to brute force in their interactions with their Armenian neighbors. Barnum of the missionary station at Van noted:

Koords are doubly lawless as the troops are occupied elsewhere and pounce upon the Christians in a most merciless way. The Koords also make their appearance with cattle, horse, etc and forcibly give them over to the Christians to be wintered. Slight resistance is made the ground for severe beatings. Kidnapping poor innocent girls has also been a terrible trial in some cases in those parts.

In the course of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, the picture that emerges from the British press depicted the war as one fought between the professional armies of two civilized empires engaged in modern state warfare. There is a counterpoint to this ideal image, an unwelcome parallel tainting the notion of a civilized Ottoman Empire: the participation of irregular contingents of Armenians, Georgians, Kurds, and Circassians,

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<sup>165</sup> American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 72:124.

who fought in the name of Christendom and Islam. In 1877, the Kurdish militia armies, led by Sheikh Jalal al-Din and Sheikh Ubeydullah, committed atrocities against civilians and a besieged Russian contingent in Beyazit and the surrounding Armenian and Kurdish countryside. The ill-provisioned militias' image as representatives of uncivilized communities, driven by instinctual violence and fanatical hatred, became an indelible part of the European political and cultural discourse. This is while retaliatory Russian forays into Van, which also wreaked havoc on villages and tribal districts, were noted incidentally. The historical data reveals a grisly picture of the developments. During the war, thousands of Kurds and Armenians became internally displaced; large droves of Armenian refugees trailed into safety of the Russian Caucasus, and Muslim immigrants left their homes in the Caucasus for permanent exile in the Ottoman territories.<sup>166</sup>

Following the war, population exchanges on confessional grounds, a process which had commenced in the late eighteenth century, became a sore harbinger of the dawning of the new world order of more homogenously ethno-religious states. At the conclusion of the war, the Ottoman army was utterly vanquished, intercommunal hostilities between Kurds and Armenians were at a peak, and the Russian army was in occupation of large swaths of Ottoman territory, ostensibly poised to claim the Black Sea and the Bosphorus straits at a moment's notice.

Alarmed by Russia's gains in the form of the Treaty of San Stefano, the Great Powers, led by Britain, scrambled to adjudicate a new treaty at the Congress of Berlin with the aim of curtailing the tsar's dangerously enlarged influence. Russia's habitual stratagem of deploying the Christian card to its advantage had this time led to the wresting of enormous territory from the Ottoman sultan in the Balkans and Anatolia, to

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<sup>166</sup> Alan W. Fisher, "Emigration of Muslims from the Russian Empire in the Years After the Crimean War," *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas* 35, no. 3 (1987): 362.; See also Zeidner, "Britain and the Launching of the Armenian Question," 468.



the extent that the prospects of the Ottoman Empire's survival looked bleak. A number of Ottoman possessions in the Balkans acquired independence or autonomy, thus setting up a temporary buffer between Russia and the Ottoman capital. In Asia Minor, the landlocked and demographically heterogeneous Armenian and Kurdish provinces of Anatolia assumed unprecedented significance. The tsar had also been unilaterally proclaimed the protector of the Ottoman Armenians, with the prerogative for the victorious emperor to intervene on behalf of his protégés when necessary.

This smashing political score posed a major threat to British, Austro-Hungarian, and French interests in the Ottoman Mediterranean regions. The strategic Suez Canal, through which much of the British trade with India flowed, led the list of endangered areas. Thus, at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, Britain managed to reverse Russia's enormous gains, and, in return, made commitments to improve the Armenian situation.<sup>167</sup> The Armenians were specifically promised to receive protection against depredations of Kurdish and Circassian tribes. But, the nature of such protection remained ambiguous. The Armenian disappointment was redressed by the publication of Britain's earlier secret agreement with the Porte in the form of the Cyprus Convention, which gave Britain "a loose form of stewardship over eastern Anatolia and possession, but not ownership, of Cyprus."<sup>168</sup> While the primary impetus driving Britain's policy was to check further Russian advances into Anatolia, the gateway to the Tigris and Euphrates estuaries at the Persian Gulf, and the Mediterranean Sea, in order to satisfy the international community, British military consuls were dispatched to Anatolia to implement reforms. They were tasked with "hearing the complaints of Christian subjects, observing the activities of Ottoman governors - and of the Kurdish tribes - and, finally, with reporting conditions to

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<sup>167</sup> Zeidner, "Britain and the Launching of the Armenian Question," 473.

<sup>168</sup> Zeidner, 474.

their ambassador in Istanbul.”<sup>169</sup> The unintended consequence, however, was not only the internationalization of the Armenian Question, but that of its associated, and yet unacknowledged counterpart, the Kurdish Question.

The new sultan, Abdülhamid II, having recently taken the reins of power of a humiliated Muslim Empire, hastened to adopt new policies with the aim of establishing unity among the now predominantly Muslim subjects. The sultan first suspended the Ottoman Constitution of 1876, as it seemed to have only succeeded in alienating the Muslim subjects. In the wake of the painful territorial hemorrhage in another imposed war on the pretext of protecting Ottoman Christians, Abdülhamid saw no point in continuing the *tanzimat* secular reforms. Instead, he decided to restore the institution of the Islamic caliphate and to embrace an avowedly pan-Islamic policy. This new policy was, of course, adopted as the sultan prioritized unity over reform. The centralizing reforms had estranged the powerful Muslim intermediaries the empire had continuously relied on before the *tanzimat* initiatives were undertaken. In the post-war era, as government control had completely lapsed in southeastern Anatolia, in the interest of imperial unity, Abdülhamid began to look favorably upon the Sunni religious notables and Kurdish chiefs as both a counterweight to the urban notables and also as centrifugal forces that needed to be restrained through recognition of their semi-independent status.<sup>170</sup>

The caliph’s new line of policy manifested early on during the war as irregular regiments were summoned to participate in the war in defense of Islam. Prominent participation of Kurds under their sheikhs, who issued *fatwas* to galvanize support among

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<sup>169</sup> Zeidner, 474.

<sup>170</sup> Stephen Duguid, “The Politics of Unity: Hamidian Policy in Eastern Anatolia,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 9, no. 2 (1973): 142–45.

Kurds and Circassians, was noted by European consuls and war correspondents. With no provisions allocated to the Kurdish and Circassian irregular regiments, the Kurds and Circassians were compelled to obtain their subsistence on the battlefields and the villages of the war zone. Plunder and widespread use of violence, provoked by religious hatred and necessity of obtaining sustenance, made headlines in the European press and parliamentary papers.

On the contrary, the Istanbul press and the sultan-caliph, whose empire faced an existential crisis, viewed the events from a radically different perspective. Increasingly stripped of rich Christian dominions in the Balkans and the Caucasus, with an influx of Muslim refugees streaming into Anatolia, Abdülhamid was determined to save what remained of the truncated empire through a counter policy of Islamism. The Sunni Kurdish tribes of Anatolia, parading as the warriors of Islam, presented a great advantage and a challenge at the same time. Following the devastating war, the frontier region was more than ever vulnerable and suffering from disorder and lack of government authority. In some sense, the post-1877-78 war era was not dissimilar to the initial phase of the *tanzimat* when the Kurdish *mirs* amassed greater power than that wielded by the government. The armed Kurdish militias' past record did not alleviate the sultan's concerns about their loyalty. In theory, the Kurdish chiefs could marshal formidable forces in protection of the imperial marches, but, in reality, the Kurds' tribal organization rendered their allegiance dubious.<sup>171</sup> In order to bolster the tribes' shifting loyalties on such exposed frontiers, the sultan sought to bind them to the empire via the only strong link existing between the Porte and the Kurds. Islam would be the solution. Financial

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<sup>171</sup> Duguid, 142–45.

strains only strengthened the sultan's belief in the expediency of fostering the Sunni identity of his Kurdish subjects.

In 1878, British military consuls toured Anatolia with the aim of implementing the reforms assigned to Britain in the Treaty of Berlin to ensure protection of Ottoman Armenians. After initial investigations, the British quickly realized the complexities involved in the Armenian Question. It was not clear where Armenia started and where it ended. In the 'shatter zone', Kurds and Armenians were dispersed over what the Europeans preferred to call 'Historic Armenia', but with the population balance actually titling in favor of the Kurds. As the new sultan prioritized unity over reform, lukewarm Ottoman cooperation in the implementation of the reforms was also prohibitive.<sup>172</sup> While the British consuls accomplished little more than accumulating reports on the critical situation of the Armenians among 'predatory Kurdish tribes', their presence, nevertheless, left a deep impression on the region's impoverished and traumatized Kurdish population. The Kurds seem to have firmly concluded that the Christian powers of Europe had come to make the Armenians masters in Kurdistan. The prospect terrified them, much exaggerated as the rumors sounded in light of Turkish propaganda that Islam was in imminent danger.

The years following the war of 1877-78 were a time for high imperial politics. New countries had been carved out of the prostrate Muslim empire. The most influential and religious elements of the Kurdish society, composed of small tribal chiefs under the sway of more powerful sheikhs against competing urban notables, were bound to react to the exaggerated rumors of the pending creation of an Armenian state under Great Power egis. The British military consuls and inspectors touring the region served as visual proof

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<sup>172</sup> Duguid, 145.

of the hyped rumors. The mass arrest and exile of the Kurdish chiefs in the province of Diyarbakir in 1880 by the commissioned reform officer, Abedin Pasha substantiated the Kurdish elites' fears of foreign domination of the Ottoman government and the suspicion that the Kurds were to be subordinated to their Armenian neighbors. The Kurdish sheikhs remained as the last bastion of Kurdish hope for establishing unity and securing representative power.

#### **UBEYDULLAH, NAQSHBANDI REVIVALISM AND THE PROJECT OF KURDISH UNITY:**

Among the Kurdish leaders, who figured frequently on the British reports during and after the 1877-78 war, Sheikh Ubeydullah led the list. He wielded immense power in his mountain fastness at Nehri in the district of Gawar [variously referred to as Nawchia] in the province of Hakkari, where, Nestorians, Queen Victoria's favorite protégés, lived at the sheikh's mercy. Moreover, the sheikh occupied a strategic position on the frontier with Iran, where he owned villages and a large following among the Kurdish tribes of the Shi'i polity. The surrounding country was also conveniently populated by Armenians, who had lately attracted so much attention, if less protection, from all the Christian Powers. Thus, the unacknowledged Kurdish Question was about to force itself upon Europe. British Consul-General at Tabriz, William Abbot, who watched the effect of Sheikh Ubeydullah's movements "with interest on this side [Iran's] of the frontier," believed that the "Kurdish question involving the welfare of thousands of Armenian Christians, will sooner or later engage the attention of Europe."<sup>173</sup> Abbot also warned that the "attitude assumed last year by the Porte towards the insurrectionary Kurdish Chief Sheikh Obeidoollah, appears likely to produce serious complications."<sup>174</sup> Mkrtich

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<sup>173</sup> Consul-General Abbott to Earl Granville. No. 8. Tabreez, July 31, 1880. Turkey. No. 5 (1881) Correspondence respecting the Kurdish Invasion of Persia, p. 8.

<sup>174</sup> Abbott to Thomson. Inclosure 2 in No. 8. Tabreez, July 15, 1880. Turkey. No. 5 (1881), p. 8.

Khrimian, the Armenian prelate of Van and the head of the Armenian delegation at the Congress of Berlin similarly saw the formation of the Kurdish League under Sheikh Ubeydullah as a sinister plot cooked up by the Ottomans “to stifle the Armenian question, by raising a new one, that of the Kurds.”<sup>175</sup> Reducing Ubeydullah to a mere Ottoman tool, the prelate presented the recent depredations of the Alpakh district in Hakkari by a section of the Iranian Shikak tribe as attempts by the Ottoman government to evacuate the Armenian populations of the region and colonize it with pro-Ottoman Kurds. Evidence, however, shows that the Shikak tribe, as the most predatory Kurdish tribe in Iran, was not receptive towards Ubeydullah’s endeavors to create a Kurdish political entity. Abbott speculates that recent dispatch of Kurdish troops under the command of the sheikh’s son may have been intended to coerce Ali Khan, the chief of the Shikak tribe, to pledge his allegiance.<sup>176</sup> Elsewhere, Ubeydullah specifically singles out this Iranian Kurdish tribe along with that of the Ottoman Herki as vile and lawless elements deserving of punishment.

A less paranoid picture of the Kurdish sheikh’s personality and project emerges from the letters of the American missionary doctor, Joseph P. Cochran (1855-1905), who visited the sheikh in June of 1880, three months before the sheikh embarked on his expedition against Iran. According to the doctor,

SHEIKH OBEIDOO LAH considers himself the third man in ecclesiastical rank in Islam. He is also the acknowledged Civil Monarch of all the Kurds, excepting a few tribes who are nominally Persian subjects. He lives in a Royal way, entertaining daily at his gates from 500 to 1,000 visitors of all classes. His character stands out in clear contrast with that seen in Persian officials as well as Turks. He, or his son, see personally all who come to them on business, no matter how trivial it may be. His home life is more simple. No alcohol ever enters his town. From early morning to late at night he and his Heir Apparent are employed

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<sup>175</sup> Letter from Monseigneur Krimian. No. 6. Van, June 20, 1880. Turkey. No. 5 (1881), p. 5.

<sup>176</sup> Abbott to Thomson. Inclosure 2 in No. 8. Tabreez, July 15, 1880. Turkey. No. 5 (1881), p. 9.

in the interests of his Government and people. The Sheik's people show great reverence and affection for him, but at the same time dare not disobey him. They say he is a just Ruler and Judge. He never takes bribes nor allows his officials to do so. Death is the punishment given to any who break this law. He is intelligent and anxious to learn what he can of civilized ideas and life. The Sheikh is trying to make citizens of his people and to discountenance all robbery and plundering. To this end he is purchasing agricultural lands at Gavar, Bashkalah, Merghever, and Terghever.

The Sheikh's son, named Shieikh Abdul Kadir, who is to succeed him, is now here. His object in coming is probably to lay before the Government a proposition on his father's part. The latter says that the Shekak Kurds, under Ali Khan, the Herkee Kurds, under Hassan Bey, together with a number of other Beys, all of whom are nominally Persian subjects, constantly rob Persian caravans and those belonging to himself. They also murder indiscriminately his subjects and those of Persia. He has often asked the Persian Government to punish them or allow him to do so, but has never been listened to nor his request regarded. He now wishes the three plains of Merghever, Terghever, and Beradoost, lying between Oroomiah and the Turkish boundary, to be rented to him for a certain amount annually, and he promises to be security for any robbery committed in those regions. He said that if this were refused, and his subjects constantly plundered, he should take the law into his own hands, and utterly demolish these tribes. His son came a few weeks ago with cannon and an army to Beradoost, to fight the Shekaks, but Ali Khan promised allegiance to the Sheikh, and in token thereof sent his son and men of rank, to the number of 100, to pay their respects to the Sheikh, who bought a village and erected a fort at Beradoost, between the Shekak and Herkee lands.<sup>177</sup>

Since other than Ubeydullah's own account, there is little extant evidence from the Kurdish perspective, this passage is quoted at length as it presents a more balanced account of Ubeydullah's personality, his project, and the presumed immediate motivation underlying his movement. The first striking theme in the report is Ubeydullah's confidence in his ability to establish a Kurdish monarchy under his direct rule as one of the highest ecclesiastics in the world of Islam. His self-designation as the third in ranking after that of Sultan Abdülhamid and the Sherif of Mecca bears testimony to his trust in the sultan as a legitimate caliph of the Sunni Muslim subjects of the empire. His own

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<sup>177</sup> Cochran to Abbot. Inclosure 4 in No. 8. Oroomiah, July 8, 1880. Turkey. No. 5 (1881), p. 9-10.

account of Abdülhamid as a sincere figure, who became so emotionally overwhelmed that could not continue to read Ubeydullah's epistle, corroborates his faith in the sincerity of the Ottoman sultan and the alignment of his pan-Islamic project with that of his own among the Kurds. From reading his letter, Ubeydullah claims, that the sultan recognized the source of the problems of the empire to lie in the incompatibility of the secular laws with those of the Prophet's *sunna*. *Ou yaqin danist kih in naqs va futur – Kamadah dar millat va davlat zuhur – Jumlah az naqs-i umur-i dini-st –va az khalaf-i shar'-i in qanunist* (He (the sultan) became convinced that all the defects and degradation appearing in the nation and the state all stem from being remiss in religious affairs and the incompatibility of the laws with those of the *sharia*).<sup>178</sup> Thus, Ubeydullah's conception of the law was one that complied with the laws of the sharia and his own effort to establish the rule of law needs to be seen from this perspective. Ubeydullah believed in the reduction of the predatory tribes to law and order as mandated by Islam. He emphasizes that alcohol was banned from his realm as a source of vice is in keeping with the *sharia*-abundance of the Naqshbandi teachings, which the sheikh sought to apply to a morally degraded world.

The American missionary physician, Dr. Cochran, also noted the sheikh's attempts to purchase land in Turkey and inside Iran in Mergawar, Baradost, and Tergawar with the aim of settling the nomadic tribes to work the land. His interest in "civilized ideas and life" and "making citizens of his subjects" go hand in hand with his intention to settle the tribes. Elsewhere, Ubeydullah also mentions that the Kurdish name had gained notoriety on account of the misdeeds of a few 'savage' tribes, a trend he endeavored to reverse by demonstrating to the Europeans that Kurds, as a distinct nation,

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<sup>178</sup> Nahri, Ubayd Allah, *Tuhfat al-aḥbāb, yā, Maṣnavī-i Shaykh 'Ubayd Ilāh Nahrī*, 110–11.



were capable of running their affairs. To this end and in the hope of gaining great power support, he offered frequent wagers to the American doctor and the British consul that he would protect Christian life and property. His efforts during the war to keep the Kurdish tribesmen from harming the Christians and his escort of the British consul away from the war zone proved that he really meant to get Europeans on his good side and that he meant well.

Sheikh Ubeydullah, by all accounts, was an ambitious man, and, following the war, was already acting as a self-styled monarch of the Kurds. Thus, it was unlikely that he would settle for the nominal favors bestowed upon him by the sultan-caliph in Istanbul. Perhaps learning from the example set by Russia and Britain, Ubeydullah also sought to play the Christian card in what had lately become the favorite game of all. The sheikh had made it plain that he entertained the idea of ruling over the Kurds, be it as an autonomous *bey* (principality) of Hakkari, or a de facto monarch of Kurdistan. To achieve this end, his initial endeavors commenced with making alliances. He built his relationships through marriages of political expedience, settling disputes, and exploiting the Naqshbandi *tariqa* network to extend his influence far and wide into both Ottoman and Persian Kurdistan. The sheikh even created the first modern Kurdish political entity, what the British dubbed the Kurdish League.<sup>179</sup> In a similar manner to the time during the war with Russia, when he dispatched letters to invite followers for *jihad* against the Russians, he wrote to most of the notable Kurdish chiefs and sheikhs of both sides of Kurdistan, summoning them to Nehri in preparation for his veritable state-making project. To solemnize the chiefs' allegiance to his cause, he swore them on the Quran.

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<sup>179</sup> Trotter to Goschen. Inclosure in No. 22. Therapia, October 20, 1880. Turkey. No.5 (1881), p. 16-17.

In order to ensure the success of his project, Sheikh Ubeydullah also turned to his Christians neighbors for support. Through Christian participation, the sheikh could increase the legitimacy of his movement before the great powers, the importance of whose goodwill had been impressed upon him in the emergence of the Armenian Question. He sent emissaries to Kochanes, the seat of Mar Shimun, to persuade the Nestorian patriarch of the prudence in lending his support to a Kurdish political entity. However, since Mar Shimun had received much attention from American missionaries, the Russian officials during the war, and recently a visit from the Anglican church missionaries with the proposal to establish mission stations in the Nestorian mountains, he was convinced that staying in the Ottoman fold was politically more judicious. Throwing in his lot with his Kurdish neighbors, whose goodwill he now felt confident to compromise, had come off his agenda. After all, the patriarch and his flock were under the impression “that the Nestorians are in some special manner entitled to the protection of England; in fact, that they are virtually British subjects, a belief which leads both to presumption on the part of the Nestorians and to an aggravation of the jealousy between the different religions and races, and of the mistrust with which England is regarded by the Turks.”<sup>180</sup>

Sheikh Ubeydullah’s vigorous attempts to create a united Kurdish-Christian front turned out to be a flash in the pan as Mar Shimun and a Kurdish sheikh in Amadia did not hesitate to report Ubeydullah’s activities to the Turkish governors of Van and Mosul. Thus, in 1879, when the sheikh finally forged the Kurdish League, the absence of his close Nestorian neighbors rankled. Follow-up intimidation and cooptation techniques failed to buy the patriarch’s loyalty. The sheikh, however, did not stop short at that. He

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<sup>180</sup> Clayton to Trotter. Inclosure in No. 7. Bashkala, July 11, 1880. Turkey. No.5 (1881), p.7.

dealt his second strong card. He sought to make the sultan face a *fait accompli* situation by claiming to be restoring order on his behalf. He followed up with his early warnings to take the matters into his own hands and proceeded to punish the predatory tribes. The two tribes, the sheikh singled out as an anathema to law and order and the reason for maligning the Kurdish name, consisted of the Ottoman Herki and the Iranian Shikak tribal confederations. Both of these tribes made constant appearance in missionary accounts for their frequent raids of Christian villages. But this was a half-truth. The sheikh was at feud with both of the tribes over pasture and village ownership rights and their refusal to submit to his will and to pledge allegiance. Making good of the pretext of reducing these rebellious tribes to order, the sheikh started campaigns in the districts of Hakkari and Amadia. Tax collectors, assigned by the sheikh, trailed the campaigns led by his oldest son, Sheikh Abdulkadir. As a result, the sheikh soon found himself at war with the Ottoman military. His defeat was swift as the Herki Kurds received timely aid from the Vali of Mosul. This was a sobering experience as Ubeydullah realized he would not stand a chance against the more organized Ottoman regiments. Having personally kept a low profile during the campaign, the sheikh was able to use the art of disinformation to dissociate himself from his son. He made apologies to the sultan, renewed his pledge of allegiance, and promised to turn in his son as proof of his honesty and loyalty. The sultan, unwilling and unable to burn the bridges with the most notable man in eastern part of Anatolian Kurdistan, responded in kind by bestowing decorations upon him.<sup>181</sup> The sheikh's pleas for an autonomous *beylik* were nevertheless rejected and his proactive attempts were stopped in their tracks.

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

## THE KURDISH INVASION OF PERSIA:

When Sheikh Ubeydullah's initial attempt at expansion southward in the direction of Amadia and Mosul in the Ottoman Kurdistan failed to yield any territorial gains, he turned his attention eastward toward Iran, perhaps influenced "by the prevailing idea of the Persian weakness."<sup>182</sup> The Ottoman Kurdish sheikh's personal grievances against the Iranian officials, especially the governor of Urumia, provided additional motivation. In 1873, in an effort to increase his own personal property, the governor of Khoi, Shuja' al-Dowleh Yusuf Khan, burned several villages of the sheikh in Mergawar, on the Iranian side of the frontier, and murdered around forty-five inhabitants of his tenants on account of their refusal to remit taxes to the Iranian government.<sup>183</sup> In 1879, Ubeydullah, through an arrangement with the governor of Urumia, Ikbāl al-Dowleh, managed to rent the entire mountainous districts west of Urmia city, consisting of Lahijan, Ushnu, Dasht, Somai, Baradost, Margewar in the form of *tuyul* (tax-farming rent).<sup>184</sup> The previous governor of Urumia, Moin al-Dowleh's practices of extortion and battery of the Kurdish khans of Ushnu and Dasht had also alienated the Kurdish elite of these districts, making them more amenable to the sheikh's proposition of ridding Sunni Kurdistan of corrupt Shi'i officials and establishing Kurdish self-rule. From the perspective of Ubeydullah, who promoted a political system of governance grounded in the teachings of the Naqshbandi-Khalidi order, both Ottoman and Iranian governments represented illegitimate forms of governance. In the Ottoman case, the sheikh continued to hold Sultan Abdülhamid II in high esteem as a pious monarch whose good intentions were stymied by the secular laws

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<sup>182</sup> Calyton to Trotter. Inclosure 2 in No. 80. Van, November 27, 1880. Turkey. No. 5, (1881), p. 74.

<sup>183</sup> Ghurīyāns, Iskandar and 'Abd Allāh Mardūkh Kurdistānī, *Qiyām-i Shaykh 'Abd Allāh Shamzīnī dar 'ahd-i Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh* (Tih-rān: Dunyā-yi Dānish, 1977), 25–26. Muhammad Shah of Qajar had granted several villages to Sheikh Taha in the 1850s and thus the villagers were exempted from paying taxes to the Iranian government.

<sup>184</sup> Ghurīyāns, Iskandar and Mardūkh Kurdistānī, 25–26.

implemented during the *tanzimat* period. When it came to Iran, he had no such qualms about railing against the shah as the head of an illegitimate and heretic Shi'i monarchy ruling over Kurdistan. In light of such attitude towards the Ottoman and Shi'i governments, Iranian officials' practices of misgovernment, which led to widespread persecution and repression of the sheikh's newly sworn subjects, were tantamount to infringement upon the rights of the steadfast believers in the true religion of the prophet. The transgressions of a corrupt Shi'i government against his Sunni Kurdish subjects, who were bound to him on both spiritual and material levels, motivated Ubeydullah to establish a Kurdish government under a Sunni administrator of justice. Thus, Ubeydullah's 1880 dispatch of his son at the head of an army into Iranian Azerbaijan represented an attempt to consolidate the gains he had already made on the spiritual level through the Naqshbandi network of disciples and materially through the *tuyul* agreement with Ikbal al-Dowleh, the governor of Urumia. His military expedition found increased legitimacy when the Iranian Kurdish chiefs joined in the leadership of the movement.

The Kurdish aghas and khans of the regions Ubeydullah rented from Ikbal al-Dowleh of Urumia had suffered much from Iranian misadministration. Their disgruntlement provided the primary impetus to welcome the sheikh's authority over their districts. The spark for the movement, however, came from deeper inside the Iranian Kurdistan, from Savujbulagh. The moment became opportune when Hamza Agha, the powerful Kurdish chief of the Mangur tribe was driven into the great Naqshbandi sheikh's fold. Wronged by the governor of Savujbulagh, Hamza Agha, a former captive in an Ottoman prison, was now a fugitive wanted by both Iranian and Ottoman states. Hamza's was a common grievance of a tribal chief against the state. He had been unjustly taxed and insulted by the governor of Savujbulagh. As was customary practice, it was expected that a tribal chief's rebellion would gain him a concession from the state in the

form of recognition of his chiefship, which would allow him to find his rightful place in the natural order of things as a vassal with renewed allegiance. The state would also often enlist the support of other tribes in quelling a rebellion, thus gaining the vantage point of reestablishing authority in the form of pardoning and reappointing the rebellious chief who had learned his lesson. But this time the natural order of things was to be shattered completely as the desperate chief, Hamza Agha, conveniently found a sympathizer in an emergent Kurdish power magnate with strong ideological authority. At this point, the frontier was no longer a line of division, and flight from one side to another was not a necessary means of defying state authority. The frontier had become a power center of its own. This power revealed itself within the ideological framework of the Shaf'i sect of Sunni Islam, which was distinct from the Hanafi confession of the Ottoman state and the Iranian state's Shi'i persuasion. As such, Hamza Agha's common tribal grievance had suddenly assumed the contours of a religious war. Appointed as Ubeydullah's chief military adviser, Hamza's mission was now to restore justice and to liberate the true religion as understood and propagated by the sheikh from the Shi'i usurpers.

Sheikh Ubeydullah seized the moment handed by Hamza's desperate situation of being at odds with both Ottoman and Iranian states and sought to put the fugitive Kurdish chief's personal vendetta and his local knowledge of the Mukri district to the best use in his state-making project. Through Sheikh Kamal, one of his *khalifas*, Ubeydullah communicated his intention to Hamza Agha, who willingly responded to the invitation he had adamantly rejected several times earlier.<sup>185</sup> Ubeydullah declared Hamza Agha the chief adviser of the army he dispatched to Iranian Azerbaijan under the command of his son and heir apparent, Abdulkadir. Hamza Agha's recruitment proved highly effective as

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<sup>185</sup> Ghurīyāns, Iskandar and Mardūkh Kurdistanī, 27.

he was instrumental in forging a coalition among the Kurdish chiefs who remained loyal to the Qajar shah. The scanty evidence available in the British, American, Ottoman, and Iranian archives impedes an accurate inventory of the sheikh's Ottoman and Iranian allies and the statistics of the participants. But once Abdulkadir marched on Savujbulagh, the influence of Ubeydullah's disciple network and his numerous Iranian tribal allies from among the elites of the frontier districts of Ushnu, Desht, Baradost Mergawar, and Tergawar proved sufficient to render the conquest of Savujbulagh without bloodshed. The Armenian chronicler Ghuriyans' insider account, which contains intimate information on the internal debates among the Iranian Kurdish chiefs and the Shi'i governor of Savujbulagh, reveals the predicament the Iranian Kurdish chiefs encountered during the sheikh's invasion. On one hand, as tribal chiefs steeped in the politics governing tribe-state dynamics, they were gravely wary of defecting to the sheikh's camp as such severance of ties with the state could cost them dearly if the shah's armies carried the day. Their landed property, deep inside the Iranian frontiers, and their state-sanctioned positions, as recognized heads of their tribes, were too valuable to forfeit for the sake of a suspect religious movement. These chiefs were well aware that, according to tradition and the established order of things, the state would reward those remaining loyal in times of crisis while severely punishing those who betrayed the state's trust. However, due to Iranian state's utter weakness and inability to confront the sheikh's swelling army, taking the opposite course of action also seemed ill-advised. After all, standing in opposition to Ubeydullah's increased authority could tarnish their social standing among their tribesmen by appearing to act in defiance of God's mandate to Sheikh Ubeydullah. The propaganda of the sheikh's zealous disciples in Savujbulagh had created an aura of holiness around the person of the sheikh to render opposition to him nigh impossible. As Ghuriyans noted, the sheikh had "many such disciples in the district of Savujbulagh, and

in some villages, he has appointed corrupt and fanatical *khalifas* (deputies), who, driven by preservation of their personal interests, constantly fan the flames of religious opposition and hatred and refer to the sheikh as *Rahmat lil-‘Aalamin* (the Grace of God), and preach damnation against those who do not follow their beliefs and call them *kafirs* (infidels).”<sup>186</sup>

It was against this context that the coming of the sheikh was initially perceived as a mission to save the followers of the Sunni sect from Shi’i oppression. The religious propaganda was so widespread and effective that the sheikh’s invasion of Iran was viewed as a divinely ordained endeavor. “People became convinced that Sheikh Ubeydullah had received inspiration from God to come at the head of his countless army to Savujbulagh and the Mukri district to save his coreligionists from Iran’s several years of transgressions and oppressions.”<sup>187</sup> Through the coming of the sheikh, this wellspring of grassroots support for the sheikh, expressed in sectarian opposition to the Shi’i government, was fast becoming political. Amidst such fervent manifestation of support for the sheikh and the absolute incapacitation of the state to put up any resistance against the Kurdish expeditionary force, the pro-Iranian chiefs and notables reluctantly threw in their lot with that of the sheikh. Even the Shi’i Karapapakh tribe of Solduz plain, emigres from the Caucasus, who had served as a bulwark against the frontier Sunni Kurdish tribes’ raids since the 1820s, were compelled to break rank with the state and join the Kurds. Thus, a large army formed, but with no provisions to sustain it, the countryside south and southeast of the lake became theirs to pillage.

The sheikhzade’s (sheikh’s son) forces established their base of operations in Savujbulagh among the welcoming Sunni Kurdish inhabitants of Mukri. Abdulkadir’s

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<sup>186</sup> Ghurīyāns, Iskandar and Mardūkh Kurdistanī, 23.

<sup>187</sup> Ghurīyāns, Iskandar and Mardūkh Kurdistanī, 27–28.



plan appeared to have involved annexation of the entire Sunni Kurdistan as far south as Sine, the capital of the ancient Kurdish emirate of Ardalān. The expedition had started in the fall, ostensibly, to complete the conquest of Kurdistan before winter, at which point the inability of the government to mount any campaigns against the Kurds during the cold season could be utilized for consolidation of power in the acquired territories. Things, however, did not go according to the plan. While the ill-provisioned Kurdish army was becoming restive, the sheikhzade, who was about to march south, received news from several villages beyond Miandoab, some thirty miles distant from Savujbulagh, pleading with the sheikh for aid, saying that “if the Kurdish *taifa* (community/tribe) does not come to our aid soon, the surrounding ‘*Ajams* (Shi’is) will destroy us.”<sup>188</sup> In response, Abdulkadir sent a small force under the command of his uncle towards Miandobab, who was killed and beheaded in a skirmish with the pro-government forces of the Charduli tribe. As the tribal code of honor demanded of the young sheikh, in reaction, he threw all caution and politics to the wind and took the course of revenge. On October 2, 1880, Abdulkadir led an onslaught against Miandoab. In the thick of the war, as Azeri and Kurdish inhabitants of the town also undertook to aid the war effort against the invading Kurdish army, a Kurdish Agha inside the town defected to the Kurdish camp after plundering the marketplace. After three hours of battle, the Kurdish army broke the town’s defenses, and, upon entrance, massacred some eight hundred inhabitants of the town, women and children included. This massive loss of life and the ensuing panic dealt a severe blow to the legitimacy of Ubeydullah’s campaign, and a turning point in Ubeydullah’s accomplishments. Dissension began to tear through the ranks of sheikhzade’s thinning army as some Kurdish chiefs such as Muhammad Agha Mamash

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<sup>188</sup> Ghurīyāns, Iskandar and Mardūkh Kurdistānī, 41.

began to more seriously consider defecting to the government camp. Loaded with spoils of war, also certain tribesmen of Mamash, Mangur, and Piran began deserting the campaigns for the safety of their mountain strongholds in the frontier.<sup>189</sup>

Sheikh Ubeydullah's movement cannot be singled out as the primary reason behind the sectarian violence that broke out between the Iranian Shi'i population and Sunni tribal forces. While sectarianism was certainly a major component in spurring Ubeydullah's invasion of Iran, the panicked violent response of the Iranian government was arguably far more consequential. In the wake of the sack of the Mukri region and the massacre of Minadoab's inhabitants, the tribally organized Iranian government's armies swept across the Mukri and Urumia plains, subjecting the Kurdish and Sunni inhabitants of the region to ruthless violent reprisals with little regard for friend or foe. This brutal punishment of Sunni Kurds by bands of unbridled tribes, incentivized by the prospect of pillage and revenge against Sunnis, resulted in the reactivation of sectarian sensibilities that had been hitherto held in check through the state's compromise policy of devolving power to the local Kurdish chiefs and khans.

In the chronicle written by Iskandar Ghuriyans, an Armenian Russian subject residing in Savujbulagh at the time of the Kurdish invasion, the Kurdish movement appears as an essentially tribal expedition motivated by material gains couched in a morally depraved ideological idiom. The narrative features dreadfully disorganized Kurdish tribal militias suffering from a lack of logistical preparation against an equally deficient government army of tribal contingents sweeping across the plain south of Lake Urumia, killing and plundering civilians. Milling across a diversely populated region, consisting of Sunni Kurds, Shi'i Karapapakhs, Armenians, Jews, and Azeri Shi'is, the

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<sup>189</sup> Ghurīyāns, Iskandar and Mardūkh Kurdistānī, 42–43.

Kurds, under the nominal command of the young son of Sheikh Ubeydullah, Abdulkadir, storm Miandoab. After a month of desperate drawn-out attempts, the Iranian government finally marshals several independently-commanded tribal regiments with little professional officer supervision to keep them under discipline. As the counter-campaign picks up momentum in the face of the Kurdish army's disintegration, the massacring and plundering of mostly Kurdish and occasionally non-Kurdish villagers goes unhindered all the way up to the frontiers of the Ottoman Empire.

While faulting the Kurds for their lack of discipline, Ghuriyans expressed greater consternation at the impolitic counter-campaign of the Iranian commanders, who did not distinguish between the guilty and the innocent parties in the conflict, "burning wet and dry together." Ghuriyans takes pain to show how the few leaders of the movement under Sheikh Ubeydullah's sway strong-armed the chiefs loyal to Iran to join in the plunder and destruction. According to Ghuriyans, had there been an experienced governor to form a coalition among the friendly Kurdish tribes, and had there been even a small Iranian army anywhere in the region, the Kurdish atrocities would have been prevented. As the Kurdish army disintegrated following the defection of a number of chiefs to the Iranian camp, Ghuriyans warned the Iranian army commander I'timad al-Saltaneh against the consequences of his indiscriminate collective punishment of the Kurds. However, the Iranian army commanders' rivalry with one another resulted in the raiding of numerous villages in the Mukri district. In the chaos, rival commanders of the government tribal regiments took to pillaging their opponents' villages with the aim of undermining their standing in the eyes of the government.

Injudiciousness, vice, lack of competence and awareness of political conduct are a set of adjectives that Ghurians deploys recurrently in his narrative to ascribe the blame for the occurrence of massacres and counter massacres. When the Iranian army's

devastation of the Mukri region goes beyond the horrors expected by Ghuriyans, he revisits the reasons behind the outbreak of the revolt of the sheikh's movement. He proceeds to narrate an interview with a Kurdish notable in Savujbulagh through which he discovers the Iranian officials' culpability. Certain recent measures had been taken by the governor which had aroused Kurdish sectarian sentiments. The governor had sought to introduce *adhan* (the call to prayer) in the Shi'i style during the month of Ramadan in an entirely Sunni town. Extortion and dispossession of Kurdish chiefs in the districts of Ushnu and Savujbulagh had also helped the grievances to assume a sectarian overtone. These measures, Ghuriyans called out as being "impolitic" and provocatively dangerous in a Sunni society given to the Ottoman sheikhs' propaganda of protecting his Sunni disciples against Iranian oppression.

Throughout the narrative, Ghuriyans invokes European cognate words such as "fanaticism", "political" awareness, and the universal laws of governance, throwing it into sharp relief that the government had failed to adopt the prevalent modern modes of governance and power-sharing. While the old order of things was egregiously violated by both sides, the Iranian government's failure to inscribe a just imperial power in the interest of restoring order recurs as the trope through which Ghuriyans analyzes the encounter of state and tribe. For the author, a "politic" course of events would have been for I'timad al-Saltaneh to set up a tribunal to put the responsible chiefs on trial and mete out punishment commensurate with their crimes. Friendly chiefs needed to have been rewarded for their collaboration with the state, but all these just and right proceedings in favor of restoration of order were compromised as lack of provisions, exacerbated by internecine rivalry among the commanding elite, inexorably led to giving unbridled license to the Iranian tribal army to plunder and kill indiscriminately. Thus, all sense of natural hierarchy, necessary for a modern state to wield the power of justice over its

subjects, evaporates into thin air, creating a sense of despair for the author, who runs for safety in the village of a tribal chief as the Iranian army approaches Savujbulagh. As the Iranian army marched into the Kurdish capital of Azerbaijan, the town presented a desolate landscape, deserted entirely by the inhabitants who had fled to the safety of mountain hideouts.

The Qajar state officials' correspondence on the subject of Ubeydullah's invasion corroborate the narrative constructed by Ghuriyans. In the early phase of the campaign, the highest state authorities such as the shah and his ministers in Tehran simply dismissed the news of the Kurdish revolt as yet another minor tribal disturbance that deserved little attention from the imperial chambers of power in Tehran. However, as the trail of news dispatches from a panicked Crown Prince at Tabriz begin to disturb the shah's complacency, his subsequent frantic correspondences demonstrate that the shah had been more than convinced of the gravity of the situation. His tone of voice in his numerous messages gradually became accusatory and vituperative as he faced the challenge of raising counter-forces with no funds at his disposal. His frustration came through a volley of disparaging messages against the Kurds. Mostofi al-Mamalik, the minister of treasury, Moshir al-Dowleh, the prime minister, and Sepahsalar, the commander-in-chief of the army, joined in by downplaying the strength and seriousness of the Kurdish revolt. In desperation, the shah sought to provoke the reluctant Azeri khans to action by playing on their sense of tribal codes of virility and honor.

As the movement progressed and panic seized Tabriz, the shah realized his utter inability to do much other than making exhortations to violence. Thus, gradually, such references to Sheikh Ubeydullah as the "enemy of state and religion" trickled into the correspondences. When the sheikh personally entered Iranian territory and laid siege to Urumia, and evidence emerged of his extensive mobilization efforts elsewhere in Iranian

Kurdistan<sup>190</sup>, a distressed Mostofi al-Mamalik appealed to the chief mujtahid of Tabriz for help:

The issue of Sheikh Ubeydullah and his subjects is gradually becoming serious. Despite the Ottoman denial of the sheikh's role in these incidents, news from Kurdistan point to his imbecility and personal involvement. The government will wipe out the rebels but it was not necessary for the state to mobilize troops in the face of such ignoramus movements of the Kurds and even bother to care about this. It is incumbent upon the frontier people and the honor of the Azerbaijanis to punish such behavior [of the Kurds]. It is with such surprise that we hear that the Kurds are engaging in pillage and murder ... and the people of the province do not dare to say a word... The state's troops have not arrived yet and if the people of the province react with honor against the Kurds, then there will be no further need for action. Inform me of your expedient action.<sup>191</sup>

In this correspondence, Mostofi al-Mamalik ostensibly seeks to hide the state's weakness through downplaying the significance of the Kurdish rebellion. However, as evidence of Ubeydullah's extensive efforts to mobilize Sunni Kurds has caused a major concern in the face of the state's unpreparedness, he found little alternative other than appealing to the Shi'i-infused patriotism of the Azeri populace. In other words, Mostofi indirectly appealed to the sectarian sentiments of the Shi'i Azeri Turks by addressing his letter to the chief Mujtahid of Tabriz, Muhammad Javad Agha. In his response, the mujtahid of Tabriz reported back to the minister that, during the Friday sermon, he had urged the people to prepare for the emergency in such a way that the audience were moved to tears. The mujtahid added that the faithful renewed their pledge of allegiance to the shah and "made worthy remarks which stemmed from their nature, sincerity of faith, and their readiness to sacrifice their lives."<sup>192</sup> Evidently, in the panic caused by the abruptness of

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<sup>190</sup> Yusuf Bayg Babapur et al., *Fitnah-i shaykh 'Ubayd Allah Kurd: guzarish 'hayi az vaqayi'-i hamlah-i Akrad bih safahat-i Azarbayjan dar dawrah-i Qajar* (Tihiran: Kitabkhanah, Muzih va Markaz-i Asnad-i Majlis-i Shura-yi Islami, 2012), 125.

<sup>191</sup> Babapur et al., 126.

<sup>192</sup> Babapur et al., 127–28.

such a major crisis, the Iranian state desperately sought to muster any kind of force that could check the expansion of the Kurdish movement. The news of the Kurdish massacre at Miandoab created widespread terror among the inhabitants of the province, prompting the resident Russian subjects to hurriedly dispatch pleas of protection to their consuls. The embarrassment stemming from the state's inability to protect its citizens against the Kurdish tribes' depredations, which was widely reflected in the European press, was an added incentive for the officials to exploit all the resources at their disposal to put down the revolt at any cost.

The Iranian officials' sense of frustration and paralysis deepened as the shah realized that mounting a military expedition was utterly reliant on the goodwill of the local khans who were locked in a fierce rivalry among themselves. This point became poignantly clear to the shah when his numerous dispatches to Taymur Pasha Khan of Maku, ordering him to relieve the besieged governor of Urumia, fell on deaf ears. When the shah was informed that Taymur was withholding his support on account of his personal rivalry with Ikbāl al-Dowleh, the governor of Urumia, all the shah could do was to apply more vitriol to the orders he persistently dispatched from Tehran. The result of such frustration and desperate efforts to raise an expeditionary force against the Kurdish insurrection was the shah's frantic invitations to use of violence against the Kurds populating the plains of Savujbulagh and Urumia, regardless of their loyalty. The Kurdish threat had shaken the state to its foundations and desperate efforts to remove the threat materialized in the form of collective punishment. Thus, when the forces of It'mad al-Saltaneh and Taymur finally moved to take sporadic action against the disintegrating Kurdish army, the shah unequivocally stated that severe violence ought to be used against the Kurds:

Mukhbir al-Dowleh, ask Taymur Khan why he is so scared like women. We expect him to invade, burn, and plunder other countries rather than being terrified by a bunch of Kurds and be thus demeaned. What does he need the state army for? It's not like there is a war between the Ottoman and Iranian states that I need to dispatch troops. Some *dimagh-nakhush* [mentally disturbed] sheikh has made a move... [ask him to] jump on his horse and expel the rebels not only from Urumia but also from Savujbulagh. Kill and plunder and burn the hell out of them, otherwise it tells me that you are fed up with your life and that of your family. I swear to God that I will leave none of you alive. This mad sheikh doesn't merit any of this. Put the frontiers in order and annihilate the Kurds ... Moshir al-Dowleh will arrive in 20 days.<sup>193</sup>

Such exhortations by the Iranian high officials eventually incited the pro-government notables at the head of the tribal regiments to extreme levels of violence against the Kurds as lack of discipline among the Kurdish armies undermined their ability to put up resistance. As suggested by the shah's dispatch above, the official discourse reduced the Kurds to that of a horde of rabbles<sup>194</sup> led by a 'mad' leader, that made them deserving of annihilation. Nasir al-Din Shah's disparagement of the sheikh and his followers represented an attempt on the part of the government to conceal its incapacity to confront the rebellion. In seeking to downplay the revolt, the shah also hoped to mask the state's total reliance on the local khans to protect the territorial integrity of his 'guarded domains'. In a similar attempt, Sheikh Ubeydullah's stated object of establishing a Sunni Kurdish state in the official Qajar correspondence was characterized by such terms as *khiyalat-i fasida* for *angikhtan-i fitna* (vicious schemes for inciting sedition)<sup>195</sup> on the part of a 'mad sheikh' pursuing *da'iya-hayi buzurg* (grand claims).<sup>196</sup> In short, the Qajar state's absolute military incapacity led the officials, initially, to deny the gravity of the situation, then, to downplay its significance by characterizing the Kurds as tribal hordes incapable of understanding anything but the idiom of violence.

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<sup>193</sup> Babapur et al., 148.

<sup>194</sup> Babapur et al., 71.

<sup>195</sup> Babapur et al., 256.

<sup>196</sup> Babapur et al., 141.



By the late October of 1880, nearly two months after the Kurdish invasion had started, Iranian tribal regiments eventually drove the Kurds out of Savujbulagh and Urumia. The sheikhzade's and Ubeydullah's armies began their retreat, followed by unruly government regiments, who conducted campaigns of terror, mass murder, and plunder of the Sunni and Kurdish inhabitants and villages throughout the region. Consul Abbott at Tabriz, quoting the American missionaries in Urumia, wrote,

The Sunnis- 5,000 families it is said, in Oroomiah - are utterly broken up, except a few villages that have changed their faith to Shiah. They are in the valleys and hamlets of the mountains in great want and most die of hunger or cold. Many of the men have been killed. A great many Shiah villages were destroyed by the Kurds and many of the men killed. Of the Christian villages, twenty seven were sacked mostly by Kurds, Shekioks and Sunni subjects of Persia; some by Taimour's men and by Shiahs. The worst is Gavilan and Charbash [villages].<sup>197</sup>

In a similar report, he elaborated on how the Iranian government's retaliatory campaigns, and general spontaneous outbreaks of violence, went beyond excessive. He stated,

Mirza Mohsun, brother of the Ameen Leshger, is alleged to be instigating the inhabitants of the Maragha plain to plunder Kurdish villages on the Tatary Tchai [Tahatu River] and that the governor of Souj Boulak has been obliged to despatch troops to repress these depredations, but unless properly supported by the Azerbaijan government, it appears doubtful whether the Vezir Fevaïd, although an official of great energy and ability, will be able to deal effectually with the present position of affairs.

It must be borne in mind by Persia that the Kurds, whatever their failings may be, are human beings; that it would be impolite to visit upon unoffending villagers - because they are Sunnis - the sins committed by Kurdish insurgents under Sheikh Abd el Kader and Hamza Agha; that Turkey does not view with indifference the molestation of her coreligionists and that such proceedings cannot fail to intensify the feelings of acrimony which unhappily exist between the Persian government and the Porte.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Abbott to Thomson. To Legation at Teheran, November 30, 1880 (FO450/8).

<sup>198</sup> Abbott to Thomson. No.5. To Legation at Teheran, January 28, 1881 (FO450/8). See also Garuši and Afshār, *Guzarishah va namah-ha-yi divāni va nizamī, 'Amīr Nizam-i Garusi*, 117-125. Hasan Ali Khan

The level of destruction was immense. From the correspondence of Hasan Ali Khan Vizier Fevayid, it becomes clear that besides the vengeance killings of the Kurds of Mukri, a great number also perished from typhoid fever. In a letter to the shah, Hasan Ali Khan, while acknowledging that the Kurdish invasion had led to the destruction of a large degree of property and lives in Azerbaijan, “but the people of this district, as punishment for their own deeds, have also suffered in a way that is hard to imagine and a sizeable part of this district has been so much razed to the ground that years must pass before this district would see a moderate degree of prosperity again.”<sup>199</sup> A large portion of the brutalized Sunni and Kurdish villagers of the plains of Savujbulagh, Solduz, Urumia, Ushnu, Mergawar, Dasht, Tergawar, and Baradost fled to the safety of the Ottoman side of the frontier, creating a large-scale refugee crisis there. As Sabri Ateş has noted, thousands of families crowded the Iranian-Ottoman frontier districts, “temporarily turning the frontier between the Ottoman Empire and Iran into a frontier between Shi‘i and Sunni Islam.”<sup>200</sup>

In the thick of the war, sectarian violence became multifaceted, with the Christians and Jews falling victim to both sides. As Katherine Cochran, the wife of the American physician, Joseph Cochran, noted in her letters to her family in the United States, “There are many Sunees living on the plains, Persian citizens, but now the hatred

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Vizier Fevayid, the new governor of Savujbulagh frequently pleaded with I’timad al-Saltaneh and the Sepah Salar to curb the depredations of the inhabitants of Miandoab and Marhamatabad, which, in light of government inaction, wreaked havoc on the inhabitants of the Mukiri district. He warns that the disturbances between these two sects, i.e., between Akrad va Ajam might assume a graver shape. He noted the inhabitants of Marhamatabad, and several villages around Maragha and the tribes of Kuranlu and Balikanlu and Charduli had launched an assault on Sarikamish, a village belonging to Sulayman Khan, plundering everything and killing at least sixty people inside the village. Some of the inhabitants, attempting to flee across the Tahtu river, had drowned, increasing the casualties up to one hundred. Hasan Ali Khan also noted that he prevented the Kurds of Murkiri from taking any retaliatory action in the face of such violence but that he feared, if no measures were taken, things would spiral out of his control.

<sup>199</sup> Amir Nizam Garuši, *Guzarishah va namah-ha-yi diḡani va nizaḡi*, *Amir Nizam-i Garusi*, ed. Īraj Afshār (Tihārān: Bunyad-i muqūfāt-i duktur mahmud-i afshar, 1994), 157.

<sup>200</sup> Ates, “Empires at the Margin,” 381.

of the Shiah is stirred against them, and Shiah falls upon Sunee, Sunee upon Shiah, and both upon Christian and Jew.”<sup>201</sup> While initially the sheikh tried to protect the Christians, by the end of the war things had spun out of his control. As Abbott noted, “By the appointment of an Armenian [Simon Agha] as Chief of his Staff and the presence of the Nestorian Metropolitan of Nawchia with a large part of his flock in the Kurdish army during the campaign, the sheikh probably thought he would ingratiate himself with the Christian populations on both sides of the frontier.”<sup>202</sup> The Nestorian villagers, who initially enjoyed Sheikh Ubeydullah’ protection, fell victim first to Kurdish depredations and then the violence of the state’s counter campaigns. The siege of Urumia by the sheikh’s army created a situation bursting with sectarian violence and mistrust. The American missionaries were thus placed in a difficult position. As Katherine reported, the American missionaries “had to negotiate with the Sheikh and keep on good terms with him for our own safety, and besides we had no quarrel with him. He is our friend, but of course the Persians could easily construe it into meaning that we were in league with him against them.”<sup>203</sup> The Azeri Shi’is of Urumia did interpret the American missionaries’ and the British Consul Abbott’s efforts at mediation as attempts to contribute to the Kurdish war effort. After all, the sheikh had acted upon his promises of protecting the Christians and managed to keep the American college and hospital premises, which stood outside the city walls, from receiving harm. Cochran’s intercession on behalf of the townspeople had led to the granting of a respite by the sheikh, a valuable time used by the inhabitants of Urumia to strengthen their defenses. Yet, suspicions against the American doctor and the British consul ran so high that upon their return from the sheikh’s camp to

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<sup>201</sup> Letter from Katherine Hale Cochran. Oroomiah, November 8, 1880. Letter from Persia by Katherine Hale Cochran, unpublished ABCFM documents from Presbyterian Historical Society, p.149

<sup>202</sup> Abbott to Thomson. No.7. To Legation at Teheran, January 31, 1881 (FO450/8).

<sup>203</sup> Letter from Katherine Hale Cochran. Oroomiah, November 8, 1880, ABFCM, p. 147.

Urumia, they were driven away by gun fire from the town forts. The cordial relations existing between the American missionaries and the sheikh had kindled suspicions among the Shi'i inhabitants that the British and the Americans were on the side of the Sunni Kurds. As the religious war intensified with a full-scale Kurdish assault on the town, a quarter of the population of Urumia was expelled on account of their adherence to the Sunni sect and potential sympathy with the sheikh's cause.

With the expelling of the Sunnis from the town, the complete destruction and pillage and massacres of the Sunni villages and inhabitants, a sectarian wall marked distinct lines between Kurds, Azeris, and the Nestorians and Armenians. While the Kurds received lukewarm support from the Ottoman officials concerned largely with the frontier question, the Azeris looked to the Iranian state, and Nestorians and Armenians placed their confidence in the American, Catholic, British, and Russian missions and governments like never before. As Katherine Cochran wrote, "There are still many things being said against us, and threats made against us and all the native Christians. There is talk of a general massacre of all the Christians during "Moharem" the Mussulman fast, now beginning."<sup>204</sup> Another American missionary's note pointed to the sectarian divide emerging in the wake of the conflict, "Since the Kurdish raid Miandoab has not recovered. Kurds do not venture into the town. For purposes of barter the Kurds and Persians have a country fair, called Kurd Bazaar, every Wednesday, on the plain west of the Tatavu."<sup>205</sup> Lt.Col. Gerard, visiting the conflict region in the winter of 1881-82, also provided a telling description of the sectarian divisions between the Kurds and the Shi'i inhabitants of Azerbaijan. "So great is exasperation against Kurds that no Kurdish

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 153

<sup>205</sup> Samuel Graham Wilson, *Persian Life and Customs, with Scenes and Incidents of Residence and Travel in the Land of the Lion and the Sun*. (New York; Chicago: F.H. Revell, 1900), 107.

muleteer would engage for Tabriz, but got a Persian returning thither for Rs. 63. Was also warned to discard the turbans of my orderlies and substitute Persian fur caps to prevent mistakes, and to wear a fez myself.”<sup>206</sup>

As Sabri Ateş has accurately argued, the 1880 war between the Sunni Kurds and the Shi’i Azeris turned religion into a stage on which sectarian identities were enacted. As noted previously, since the Crimean War, the Kurdish polity on both sides of the frontier experienced increased marginalization, a process reflected in the attempts to demarcate the Ottoman-Iranian boundaries. This peripheralization of the Kurdish polity and the decline of the Kurdish representative elites coincided with the empowerment of the region’s Christian communities and the Shi’i administrative expansion into Iranian Kurdistan. While in Ottoman Hakkari the Nestorians and Armenians received legal redress through the medium of missionaries and consuls, the Kurdish polity was riven by internecine tribal conflict and collaborative efforts between petty Kurdish notables and Ottoman minor officials to squeeze agriculturalists and nomadic tribesmen. On the Iranian side, a weakened state’s efforts at centralization resulted in the replacement of the Kurdish khans by Shi’i Azeri landlords and officials prone to endemic misadministration. Following the war of 1877-78, a vacuum in state authority on both sides of the frontier provided the opportunity for the only viable and indigenous representative body to assert itself. The ideological basis provided by the Naqshbandi order had enabled the Kurdish communities to gather under the charismatic leadership of Sheikh Ubeydullah and make an attempt at stemming the tide of marginalization.

Sheikh Ubeydullah’s campaigns and the Iranian state’s counter-campaigns reactivated the latent sectarian identities of the diverse groups of the region at the time

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<sup>206</sup> Montagu Gilbert Gerard, “*Notes of a Journey through Kurdistan in the Winter of 1881-82.*” [4v] (8/56), 1883, 23.

when national identities and loyalties were beginning to take shape. As the emerging global system moved in the direction of defining legitimate polities in terms of nationalities within distinctive bounded territories, the Sunni religious identity of the Kurds, articulated through the Naqshbandi teachings, that highlighted the establishment of *sharia* as the primary basis for social organization, became the focal point of Kurdish self-identification. Yet, this process was short-lived and destructive, leading to further breakdown of the Kurdish representative structures.

To conclude, it was at the nexus of the failure of the Ottoman *tanzimat* reforms, the lingering frontier disputes between the Ottoman and the Iranian empires, the Iranian government's indiscriminate collective punishment of the Kurds, and the Kurds' dramatic marginalization vis-à-vis their well-represented Christian and Shi'i neighbors that confessional worldviews began to permeate the Kurdish communities straddling the borders. Sheikh Ubeydullah's campaign was the channel through which Kurdish resistance to the process of peripheralization manifested in the form of confessional conflict. The fragmented tribal communities of Hakkari and the Urumia region, facing increased state violence and diminished representation, were progressively forced to resort to sectarian violence to preserve their communal integrity and their nomadic way of life on a shrinking frontier. To put it differently, the Kurdish tribes of Hakkari and Urumia sought more violent alternatives to carve a space for themselves in a society they perceived as being incrementally restricted by dynamics that seemed to favor their Christian and Shi'i neighbors at their expense. Thus, the local and tribal ethos of the Kurdish society, hitherto defined by age-old traditions and customary laws, making up the predominant paradigms of a migratory lifestyle, gave way to new conceptions of a communal identity tempered in the crucible of violence against the peoples of the plains of Urumia represented by American and British *gavurs* (pagans) and Shi'i heretics.

Ubeydullah's movement was ultimately a failure, which prompted the Iranian state to violent reprisals against the majority of its Kurdish subjects in Azerbaijan, hence the creation of a sectarian ethos that engulfed the region until the end of World War I.

### **Chapter 3: Imperial Frontier Anxieties: Armenian Revolutionaries, Hamidiye Regiments, and the Iranian Kurds**

The Iranian state's desperate struggle to pacify its northwestern frontiers in the wake of Sheikh Ubeydullah's 1880-81 revolt created a political crisis that was inextricably tied to the questions of subjecthood and state sovereignty. The persistence of the sheikh's struggle amidst a refugee crisis brought the Iranian and Ottoman states to the periphery of their empires to respond to grave concerns over control of restive overlapping populations along their disputed frontiers. Thousands of Iranian Kurdish subjects had fled across the border and were looking to the Ottoman sultan for redress. The situation was fraught with anxiety for the neighboring states and the borderland populations, leading to a torrent of exchanges between Iranian and Ottoman officials over issues of indemnities and punishment of rebels. At the heart of the debates was the question of the rebels' subjecthood, which was inextricably tied to their religious persuasion, their motives for the rebellion, and state authority over punishment of the Kurdish rebels.

Sheikh Ubeydullah, from the safety of Ottoman territory among thousands of Kurdish refugees, claimed that his campaign was spurred by the oppression of Sunnis by Iranian Shi'i authorities. Stating the reason for his revolt in unequivocal words, Ubeydullah asserted, "the oppression Sunni people were subjected to by the Iranians, together with the depredations some Iranian tribes committed on our side from Baghdad to Abizeyd, forced the people on both sides, who were tired [of this oppression], to unite and take revenge on the Iranians."<sup>207</sup> Building on the sheikh's proclaimed motives, and with the primary object of undermining Iranian frontier claims, the Ottoman authorities

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<sup>207</sup> BBA, Y PRK ASK 4/82, 4th Army Mushir Samih Pasha to the OMD, 20 TE 96/01 November, 1880. Quoted in Ateş, "Empires at the Margin," 353-4.



sought to highlight the sectarian nature of the revolt and the role of the Ottoman sultan as the legitimate sovereign of Sunni borderlanders. In January 1881, the Mushir of the IVth Army, Samih Pasha, advised the Porte that “If a general amnesty for the Sunnis who participated in this affair could be proclaimed, the depredations of Iranian marauders/bandits be prevented decisively, and the sheykh be fully satisfied by the Iranian government, the problem would be rapidly solved and this is only possible with the just hand of the *Caliph* [emphasis is mine].”<sup>208</sup> Portraying the Kurds as a confessional community, justifiably driven to revolt on account of the rebels’ sectarian grievances, Samih Pasha declared that the refugees’ redress could only be sought with the Ottoman caliph as the rightful sovereign of Sunnis, thus suggesting that the sultan’s sovereignty be extended beyond the disputed frontiers. As it follows from his arguments, the full satisfaction of the sheikh’s demands by Iranian authorities, i.e. the restitution of his usurped property, would translate into territorial gains for the Ottoman state. The Porte was more than ready to invoke and apply similar claims to what it had continuously encountered in its contests with the great powers over its Christian Balkan populations. If the great powers could pursue their territorial aggrandizement schemes through promoting the rights of Ottoman Christian subjects in the form of the Eastern Question, the new sultan, Abdülhamid II, was determined to safeguard his East Anatolian frontiers through pursuit of a similar line of policy. He was now to be the protector of all Sunnis, especially those that had been mistreated by the Iranian Shi’i authorities.

The Iranian officials’ response, carefully worded to discredit the sultan’s claim to authority over all Sunni subjects of the frontier, definitively identified the sheikh as an Ottoman subject in rebellion and transgression of international boundaries. Even so, the

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<sup>208</sup> BBA, YPRK ASK 4/82, 4th Army Mushir Samih Pasha to the OMD, 20 TE 96/01.11.1880 and Y PRK ASK. 7/34, p. 10. Nafiz Pasha’s letter about the sheykh’s letter to the Kaimmakam of Gevar, 1 Zilhicce 97 ve fi 22 TS 96 / 04 November, 1880. Quoted in Ateş, “Empires at the Margin,” 354.

Iranian authorities' efforts to downplay the sectarian nature of the punitive campaigns against the rebels ironically served to promote the increased significance of sectarian identities in the process of establishing legalized sovereignty over disputed frontier districts. The missives from the Iranian side denied that the shah's governors had oppressed Sunni subjects because they were Sunnis, asserting that even if that was the case, the sheikh had no authority to seek redress personally. In an obvious attempt to challenge the sectarian arguments put forth by the Ottoman state, the Iranian authorities charged: "even though Shi'is in "foreign countries" [read the Ottoman] had been subjected to many injustices, had a Shi'i sheykh ever caused such mischief and taken action?"<sup>209</sup> Naser al-Din Shah took a step further in strengthening his position vis-à-vis the Porte's sectarian pursuits in the borderlands by personally appealing to Sultan Abdülhamid. Stressing the priority of Islamic unity, a trope in wide currency since the establishment of the Qajar dynasty, the shah pled with the sultan to view the two states as part of an Islamic *umma* and to allow Iranian armies to cross the frontiers in order to punish the rebels.<sup>210</sup>

Sheikh Ubeydullah's revolt had been specifically waged in the hope to replace Iranian Shi'i sovereignty over Sunni Kurdish frontier regions with a Sunni government based on the teachings of the Naqshbandi-Khalidi order. Ubeydullah's vision of the Ottoman reforms, as attested by his own account, consisted of a revitalized Islamic order that could be promoted and upheld by the faithful Kurdish community under his religious leadership as a *mujaddid*, a renewer of the faith in the style of Ahmad Sirhindi and Mawlana Khalid of Shahrezur. His vision of order was one deeply steeped in the *sharia* and the prophetic traditions. Thus, for him, the glory of the Ottoman Empire had long

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<sup>209</sup> BBA, Y PRK EŞA 2/73, no date, [1298/1882], Quoted in Ateş, "Empires at the Margin," 355.

<sup>210</sup> Ateş, "Empires at the Margin", 355-56.

lapsed due to the Ottoman statesmen's abandonment of the laws of Islam. The sheikh berated the *tanzimat* reformers for having subordinated Islamic traditions to secular European laws. He called his contemporary Ottoman administrators the enemies of religion and "wolves in sheep's hide."<sup>211</sup> To Ubeydullah, such depravity in the Ottoman domains was matched by the corruption of the Naqshbandi-Khalidi order after Mawlana Khalid and his most prominent disciples, such as Siraj al-Din, had left Kurdistan for Syria in the 1820s. The Naqshbandi orders in Kurdistan, according to Ubeydullah, were mired in corrupt practices such as *kiramāt* (miracles by saints) and hereditary ordination of sheikhs and *khalifas* (sufi representatives) without strict adherence to the *sharia*. In other words, Ubeydullah conceived of his mission as one involving the reestablishment of the just and right order that had been promoted and upheld under Mawlana Khalid.<sup>212</sup>

As it is evident from his own account, Sheikh Ubeydullah viewed Sultan Abdülhamid II's policies with approbation as they were commensurate with his own vision of politics in Kurdistan. The sheikh's recasting of the Kurdish communal identity was based on a sectarian vision of politics. The Iranian and Ottoman states' ensuing competition over control of the frontiers and their overlapping populations only reinforced what Ubeydullah had envisioned, even though his revolt did not reach the objectives he had intended. In the course of the debates between the two states over the fate of the rebellious subjects, the saliency of the sectarian discourse came to the fore. Regardless of whether they sought to highlight or downplay the sectarian character of the rebels' motives and the states' responses, religion had become the defining factor in the redrawing of communal and state boundaries. In the post-Ubeydullah era, the Sunni Kurdish tribes were no longer viewed as merely nomadic groups in violation of state

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<sup>211</sup> Nahri, Ubayd Allah, *Tuḥfat al-aḥbāb, yā, Maṣnavī-i Shaykh 'Ubayd Ilāh Nahrī*, 110–11.

<sup>212</sup> Nahri, Ubayd Allah, 128–30.

boundaries. They were Sunni subjects who had applied to the Ottoman sultan for protection on account of sectarian oppression by the neighboring state, and thus they claimed that they constituted an integral part of the Ottoman socio-political fabric along with the frontier districts they inhabited.

The agitations continued well into 1881 as the rumors of an impending insurrection continued to be rife among the Kurds of the northern frontier districts. Meanwhile, Ubeydullah kept up his correspondence with the chiefs of Kurdistan, extending promises that great power support for an independent Kurdistan was contingent upon the Kurdish refugees' continued resistance to return to the lands of the '*ajams* [Shi'i Iranians]. Meanwhile, in the throbbing center of the rebellion at Savujbulak in 1880, Hassan Ali Khan Garusi, a Shi'i Kurd and former Iranian ambassador to Paris, had taken up post as governor. A keen politician, Hasan Ali Khan urgently adopted a series of measures in order to neutralize the possibility of a renewed alliance among the Kurds of Iran under Sheikh Ubeydullah. Thousands of refugee families had flocked around the sheikh in Ottoman territory and in desperation sold their belongings to purchase guns in preparation for another strike against Iran. They had proclaimed to the sultan's aid-de-camp, Ahmed Ratib Bey, that they had put their trust in "the august compassion of our benefactor, the Caliph of the World [Halife-i Ruyi Zemin]" and as Sunnis would no longer recognize the '*ajam shah*.<sup>213</sup>

Ubeydullah's efforts to prevent the refugees from returning did not materialize as the Porte's trust in Ubeydullah's activities gradually diminished. This turn of events facilitated Hasan Ali Khan's inducement of the refugees to return to their homes. This was extremely important if the shah's sovereignty was to be reestablished successfully.

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<sup>213</sup> BBA, Y PRK MYD 1/85, Ahmed Ratib Bey [Rewanduz]. Quoted in Ateş, "Empires at the Margin," 385-86.

Hasan Ali's commissioned Kurdish spies had intercepted correspondence from the sheikh, the contents of which suggested that Ubeydullah's religious and political influence among the Kurds ran far deeper than previously understood. Evidence also emerged of the sheikh's relentless activism along with his chief general Hamza Agha's endeavors to forge a union among the Kurdish tribes of Mesopotamia under Seyyid Abdulkadir for another uprising. In January 1881, Hassan Ali Khan was notified that Sheikh Abdulkadir and Hamza Agha had set off for Arbil, where they participated in a conference with Ahmad Ratib Bey and the Kurdish chiefs of Mesopotamia in order to mobilize support for another uprising against Iran. In light of such activities and the ostensible support of the Ottoman government, the Kurdish chiefs kept up sporadic resistance.<sup>214</sup>

The widespread rumors concerning the sheikh's preparations had proved effective in keeping the spirit of rebellion alive among the Kurds. The tribal chiefs of Sardasht, a district south of Savujbulagh, refused to heed Hassan Ali Khan's orders to pay their tax arrears in submission to the government. In response, Hasan Ali Khan sought to counter the rumors by taking pragmatic action. As soon as he arrived in town, he made sure that the Sunni clergy enjoyed liberty to practice their religion in return for renewing their allegiance to the shah.<sup>215</sup> He also secured royal decrees for the reestablishment of the friendly Kurdish chiefs to their previous posts as frontier guards. Such measures were deemed especially necessary, as the governor was well aware of the Qajar state's inability to maintain a permanent military force in Kurdistan. Following tradition, in return for their loyalty, Hasan Ali Khan made the chiefs' restoration of their privileges contingent upon their services to the government in reducing the rebellious tribes to order. The most

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<sup>214</sup> Garuši, *Guzarishah va namah-ha-yi diṡani ʿva nizāmī*, "Amīr Nizām-i Garusi", 326–26.

<sup>215</sup> Garuši, 324.

prominent chief among the Iranian Kurdish notables, whom Hassan Ali treated with special preference, was Mohammad Agha of Mamash. He was the very Kurdish notable who had prevented his tribesmen from participating in the massacre of the inhabitants of Miandoab. Mohammad Agha of Mamash had also successfully persuaded a number of other chiefs to defect to the state. Having amply proven his allegiance through offering numerous gifts and voluntary services, the loyal Kurdish chief was duly rewarded with an appointment as governor of Lahijan and Ushu.<sup>216</sup>

The Iranian state's persistent pleas with the Porte and its appeals to Russia for intervention on its behalf finally convinced the Ottoman Council of Ministers of the advisability of removing the sheikh from the borderland. In light of the recent internationalization of the Armenian Question and Russia's unequivocal support for Tehran, the Porte prioritized imperial frontier security over the Sunni Kurdish communities' grievances. In fact, as Sabri Ateş has noted, reflecting similar developments on the Iranian side of the frontier, the sheikh's rebellion had provided the Porte with a suitable opportunity to re-inscribe its writ in the frontier zone, which had been seriously compromised in the wake of the recent war with Russia.<sup>217</sup>

Moreover, the Porte's stance during the negotiations with Iran over the revolt revealed an inchoate policy that would assume more salience in the coming decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Emulating great power politics of intervention in Ottoman affairs on behalf of Christian minorities, Ottoman authorities similarly sought to portray the Kurdish-Iranian conflict as a deplorable act that merited international attention. Echoing the new approach to politics in the global interstate system, the sultan's aide-de-camp, Ahmed Ratib Bey, described the refugee crisis as one stemming from Iranian inability to

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<sup>216</sup> Garuši, 341.

<sup>217</sup> Ateş, "Empires at the Margin," 379.

provide security to its Sunni subjects. Ratib Bey's comment insinuated that just like the great powers had midwived the successions of the Ottoman Balkan possessions under the pretext of protecting Christians, the Ottoman state, by the same logic, as protector of Sunnis, was entitled to interfere in Iranian affairs. It would, however, take the Porte some time to put this policy into practice by encroaching on the contested Sunni Kurdish inhabited parts of Iran with the declared aim of providing frontier security. Reflecting both Ottoman anxieties and perhaps anticipating the Porte's future assertiveness on behalf of the shah's Sunni subjects across the frontier, Ratib Bey, in the course of discussing Iran's brutal post-revolt suppression, maintained that, "Fearing that these cruelties might be heard in Europe, they [sipehsalar] are claiming that Taimur Khan's and Ekbal od-Dawleh's forces are under control...The amnesty declared is not sincere and nobody is heeding the call."<sup>218</sup> Similarly, the Iranian chief-commander Sepahsalar's counter arguments that it had suppressed the revolt without foreign aid suggested that in the context of the post-Berlin Congress and the prevalence of the national idea such concerns about possible Ottoman or other great power intervention on behalf of ethno-religious communities were taken seriously.<sup>219</sup>

Sheikh Ubeydullah's continued endeavors to prepare for another rising did not just worry Iran. The possibility that the sheikh's revolt would draw international attention to a Kurdish Question in parallel to the Armenian one, with the potential for exploitation by Iran, Russia, and Britain, unsettled Ottoman elites in Istanbul.<sup>220</sup> In the context of the Great Game, Ottoman concerns over a potential British-Russian *détente* in Asia Minor were acute, especially since the sheikh had actually sought great power support through

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<sup>218</sup> BBA, Y PRK MYD 1/91, Telegram from Navy Colonel Yaver Ahmed Ratib Bey, 03 January, 1880. Quoted in Ateş, "Empires at the Margin," 380.

<sup>219</sup> Ateş, "Empires at the Margin," 380.

<sup>220</sup> Ateş, "Empires at the Margin," 382.

the British consul of Tabriz and the American missionaries in Urmia. Thus, even though the sheikh had actually helped to strengthen Ottoman frontier claims by ostensibly championing the cause of the sultan as the protector of Sunnis, the continuation of his revolt, fraught with unpredictable outcomes, now presented a graver threat. It had gradually dawned on the Ottoman authorities that Ubeydullah's actions belied his verbal declarations of allegiance to the sultan.<sup>221</sup> He had reached out to the British consul and had declared that the Kurds constituted a distinct nation and were thus entitled to running their own affairs. Moreover, the sheikh's continued championship of the cause of Sunnis posed a challenge to the exclusive authority of the caliph as the representative of the Sunni Muslims of the empire and beyond.<sup>222</sup>

While the Kurdish movement did hold the potential to challenge the caliph's authority and Ottoman territorial sovereignty through provoking great power intervention, the sheikh's proclamations about leading a Kurdish nation were more significant as they underlined the inauguration of a new chapter in intercommunal relations. As Michael Reynolds has suggested, Ubeydullah's movement emerged merely two years after the Congress of Berlin had officially recognized the national idea as the legitimate basis of sovereignty through creating new nation-states in the Balkans. The Congress's official acknowledgement of the Armenian Question in the form of mandating a set of reforms exclusively for the Armenians reinforced the enormous significance of the national idea and having a great power patron to support its pursuit. From his statements, it is evident that Ubeydullah realized that the international balance of power had shifted. His cultivation of friendly relations with the American missionaries

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 383.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 383.



and the British consul had meant to secure great-power support for his project of self-rule.

Thus, having recognized the power of the national idea as a legitimate source of sovereignty in the new global order, Ubeydullah, cognizant of the fact that his tribal followers did not constitute a nation in the modern sense of the word, nevertheless made gestures and proclamations that made it sound like he had a nation. Therefore, the importance of Ubeydullah's movement did not so much lie in the enormous destruction it caused or in its failure to achieve its intended objects. Rather, it was significant "for the way it reflected emerging intercommunal anxieties, the increasing importance of European powers in local politics, and the creeping impact of the national idea."<sup>223</sup> Realizing the danger lying in Ubeydullah's continued insurgency, the Porte concluded that if there was concern for Sunni subjects under an oppressive Shi'i rule, it was the sultan who had the ultimate authority to act in their defense within the parameters of the international law.<sup>224</sup>

When Sheikh Ubeydullah was summoned to Istanbul by direct orders from the sultan in October 1881, it was clear that the movement had petered out. Hassan Ali Khan, the governor of Savujbulagh, took prompt action in turning the occasion into an opportunity for the display of royal power. He ceremoniously proceeded to re-inscribe the imperial sovereignty of the shah by gathering the notables of the town and the outlying districts in the city center, where he made a public announcement about Sheikh Ubeydullah's recall and the mercy bestowed by the shah on his remorseful subjects.<sup>225</sup> As

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<sup>223</sup> Michael A. Reynolds, "Abdurrezzak Bedirhan: Ottoman Kurd and Russophile in the Twilight of Empire," *Kritika* 12, no. 2 (March 22, 2011): 419.

<sup>224</sup> BBA, Y E E 82/6, 8.R.1298-25.12.1296/09 March, 1881. A memo from the prime ministry, quoted in Ateş, "Empires at the Margin," 384.

<sup>225</sup> Garuši, *Guzarishah va namah-ha-yi diḡani va nizāmī*, "Amīr Nizām-i Garusi", 314–15.

Sabri Ateş has aptly stated, “the campaign of the Iranian army in the aftermath of the rebellion was a public display, albeit violent, of establishing undisputed Shi‘i supremacy in the lands occupied by the Sunnis.”<sup>226</sup>

In light of the disquieting news of the sheikh’s recall, Hamza Agha, who was no longer able to seek refuge in the territories of either state, yielded to the overtures of Hassan Ali Khan to surrender himself on the promise of receiving pardon. When he was escorted to Savujbulagh by the chief *qadi* of town and Kader Agha, Hamza Agha of Mangur, along with several companions, was shot dead in a tent, where he awaited Hassan Ali Khan’s arrival at the negotiating table. Notably, the royal pardon was extended to Kakallah, Hamza Agha’s brother, who had also helped to induce his brother’s surrender. For betraying his brother, Kakallah was rewarded with a robe of honor and sent back among the Mangur tribe to keep peace on behalf of his royal majesty, the shah.<sup>227</sup>

Within the hierarchical framework of the politics of notables, with the shah having the ultimate authority over life and death, the treacherous murder of Hamza Agha was nothing out of the ordinary. Shahs and sultans had often resorted to such punishments when subjects transgressed boundaries. What was different, however, was that the movement he had led on behalf of the charismatic Naqshbandi sheikh, the self-styled representative of the caliph, had somewhat redrawn those boundaries. Even though the movement was short-lived and quickly fell apart along tribal lines, it nevertheless temporarily and tentatively redefined the boundaries of the Kurdish tribes as a sectarian community, characterized in their opposition to the Iranian Shi‘i state, and Armenian and Nestorian communities. As Ussama Makdisi has argued, sectarian identities are

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<sup>226</sup> Ateş, “Empires at the Margin,” 370.

<sup>227</sup> Abbott to Thomson, Tabreez, no. 24, August 3, 1881, (FO 248/382)

contingent, intermittent, and tenuous fabrications of multiple processes of colonial, imperial, and local encounters on the site of religion. The Kurdish tribes certainly did not emerge as a sectarian community overnight. It was against the long process of Ottoman and Iranian reforms and centralization drives, reflected in the very physical and symbolic act of making the boundaries between the two states, that religion turned into a space for redefinitions of communal boundaries. Tribal violence and state counter violence hardened those boundaries further as Iranian Kurdish refugees had to physically seek refuge in Ottoman territory where the sultan had become the merciful sovereign with the power to stave off danger from a hostile Shi'i state that punished desperate Sunnis indiscriminately.

#### **IMPERIAL RIVALRY OVER FRONTIER SHI'I, SUNNI, NESTORIAN, AND ARMENIAN COMMUNITIES:**

As Hasan Ali Khan captured and killed Kurdish rebels by stratagem in the Mukiri district south of Lake Urmia, Mirza Hussein Khan Sepahsalar, in collaboration with Mohammad Rahim Khan Ala' al-Dowleh, the Amir-i Nizam [chief-commander of Azerbaijan's forces], took measures to restore order across the plains of Solduz, Urmia, and Salmas further north. Sepahsalar stationed several regiments in strategic places to serve as a deterrent against the anticipated renewal of a Kurdish rising in the coming spring.<sup>228</sup> With the militarization of the northern parts of the Iranian Sunni Kurdistan in full swing, William G. Abbott, the British consul, asserted that the sheikh would not stand a chance were he even to succeed in instigating another rebellion.

Five regiments with fifteen hundred cavalry and four Uchatius guns under the Nassir ed Dowleh - who is accompanied by Captain Standeisky of the Austrian corps, as Military adviser - proceeded hence to Oroomiah a month ago in addition to the forces and artillery already stationed in that province under the Ikbāl ed

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<sup>228</sup> Abbott to Thomson, Tabreez, no. 7, January 31, 1881, (FO 248/382).

Dowleh, the Itimad es Sultaneh and Captain Wagner. These troops are in excellent discipline....<sup>229</sup>

Echoing the British government's official policy of reestablishing security along the Iranian-Ottoman frontiers in the interest of resuming the boundary-making efforts, Abbott praised the Amir-i Nizam for his contribution towards achieving that objective. Abbott described him as the right person to ensure stability on the frontiers of the two Muslim powers as he was a man "possessed of great energy and a strong will." The Amir-i Nizam had installed about twenty regiments in different localities on the frontier.<sup>230</sup> These districts were precisely the locales that had generated much contention over their delimitation during the last thirty years and would continue to frustrate all sides until the beginning of the First World War.

Further north on the hills west of Salmas, Ali Khan, the notorious and formidable chieftain of the Shikak tribal confederation, flouted government authority. While a faction of the Shikaks had joined the rebellion and another the government troops from Maku, his tribesmen had rebuffed Ubeydullah's and the government's overtures to fight.<sup>231</sup> Instead, the Shikak cavalymen, singled out by Sheikh Ubeydullah

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<sup>229</sup> Abbott to Thomson, Tabreez, no.17, June 7, 1881, (FO 248/382).

<sup>230</sup> Ibid. "These troops, numbering in all about fifteen thousand men and armed for the most part with chassépot rifles, are located at Oroomiah, Somai, Beradost, Souj Boulak, Merghever, Lahijian, Khoi and Selmas and fully adequate for purposes of defense." In the same report, Abbott also noted that Jalil Agha Mukri, who had taken part in the revolt and the massacre of Miandob inhabitants, was blown from a mortar in a barracks in Tabriz.

<sup>231</sup> Cochran to Abbott, Oroomiah, July 8, 1880, Inclosure 4 in No. 8, Correspondence Respecting the Kurdish Invasion of Persia (Turkey. No. 5, 1881), 9. Cochran wrote: "The Sheikh's son, named Sheikh Abdul Kadir, who is to succeed him, is now here [Urmia]. His object in coming is probably to lay before the Government a proposition on his father's part. The latter says that the Shekak Kurds, under Ali Khan, the Herkee Kurds, under Hassan Bey, together with a number of other Beys, all of whom are nominally Persian subjects, constantly rob Persian caravans and those belonging to himself. They also murder indiscriminately his subjects and those of Persia. He has often asked the Persian Government to punish them or allow him to do so, but has never been listened to nor his request regarded. He now wishes the three plains of Merghever, Terghever, and Beradoost, lying between Oroomiah and the Turkish boundary, to be rented to him for a certain amount annually, and he promises to be security for any robbery committed in those regions. He said that if this were refused, and his subjects constantly plundered, he should take the law into his own hands, and utterly demolish these tribes. His son came a few weeks ago with cannon and an army to Beradoost, to fight the Shekaks, but Ali Khan promised allegiance to the

for their contribution to the defamation of the reputation of the Kurds, exploited the chaos of the war to plunder the country around Salmas. In January 1881, the sepahsalar had a conference with Ali Khan Shikak in Salmas, during which he ordered the chief to summon back the Shikak refugees across the frontier, return the plunder to the inhabitants of Salmas, send one of his sons to stay in Tabriz as a hostage to guarantee his future good conduct, and be held accountable for any disturbances and robberies in the districts of Somai, Chahriq, and Khoi, and finally to pay his tax arrears in their entirety. In return, the government would pledge to protect Ali Khan and his *ashiret* from encroachments and transgressions of the governors of Khoi and Urmia.<sup>232</sup> Thus, a temporary peace had been patched up but the peace deal did not hold as in August 1881, it was reported that the Amir-i Nizam and Nasir al-Dowleh besieged the Shikak stronghold at Chahriq, and after heavy bombardment of the castle, managed to seize the place. However, the mission was not accomplished before the Shikaks had inflicted a heavy toll in casualties on the government forces, which had received training in modern warfare under captains Sandinsky and Wagner. Ultimately, “the gallant old man”, Ali Khan had made it to safety on the Turkish side of the frontier, where he and his tribesmen were received by Ottoman officials like “prodigal sons.”<sup>233</sup>

The Ubeydullah-led Kurdish uprising and the Shikak conflict with the Iranian forces occasioned the cause for loud objections by the Ottoman state. Behject Effendi, the Ottoman consul at Tabriz, rebuked the Iranian forces’ widespread brutality against the Kurds of Salmas and Savujbulagh, claiming that the victims had been targeted merely on account of their religious affiliation with the Ottoman Sunni sect of Islam. He also pled

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Sheikh, and in token thereof sent his son and men of rank, to the number of 100, to pay their respects to the Sheikh, who bought a village and erected a fort at Beradoost, between the Shekak and Herkee lands.”

<sup>232</sup> Babapur et al., *Fitnah-i shaykh `Ubayd Allah Kurd*, 631–33.

<sup>233</sup> Abbott to Thomson, Tabreez, no. 46, September 26, 1881, (FO 248/382).

on behalf of the Armenian subjects, whom, he alleged, were so terrorized that they contemplated seeking refuge in Ottoman territory or alternatively in Russia. The Ottoman official maintained that the Armenians had been subjected to excessive violence for their alleged assistance to the Kurds in their resistance against the Iranian government's tyranny.<sup>234</sup>

In the ensuing fierce bickering between the two states over the question of indemnity for the losses incurred as a result of the Kurdish invasion, the Ottomans highlighted the confessional identity of the Kurds as Sunnis, a line of argumentation that they had encountered frequently in their dealings with the great powers over the fate of their own Christian subjects. The Porte's resort to such a strategy dated back to the initiation of the boundary-making efforts, during which Darvish Pasha represented the Ottoman state. In the early 1850s, Darvish Pasha, who was expected to join the other three British, Russian, and Iranian commissioners to continue the delimitation of the Ottoman-Iranian frontiers, toured the frontier country on his own. Iranian reports indicated that Darvish Pasha had undertaken to induce the Kurdish inhabitants of the disputed frontiers to pledge allegiance to the Porte on account of their sectarian affiliation with the sultan. In order to encourage the indifferent villagers and tribesmen to become proactive in their declarations of allegiance, he had made promises of exemption from taxation for a period of ten years and had also bestowed royal gifts on influential notables. Apparently, the borderlanders had echoed Darvish Pasha's unilateral claims in the frontier, believing that the Ottoman frontier extended up to Lake Urmia. On a different occasion in 1852, it was reported that Darvish Pasha had asked the residents of

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<sup>234</sup> Abbott to Thomson, Tabreez, no. 38, September 9, 1881, (FO 248/382).

the districts of Sardasht and Chahriq to sign *mazbatas*, testifying to their Ottoman subjecthood.<sup>235</sup>

Following Sheikh Ubeydullah's revolt, the Ottoman authorities merely built upon the prominent rebel's call for Kurdish unification on the basis of Sunni Islam to counter Iranian claims for indemnity and territorial irredentism. Their Iranian counterparts countered such measures by their own efforts to win Kurdish loyalty on both sides of the frontiers. For instance, in November 1885, when Khalid Beg Baban was about to be posted as the Ottoman ambassador to Tehran, the Iranian ambassador in Istanbul urged the foreign minister in Tehran to exploit the opportunity to advance Iran's interest in the border question. Apparently, Khalid Beg had served variously as the first secretary to the Ottoman embassy in London and had close relations with Rashad al-Din, the Ottoman crown prince as his teacher. Sultan Abdülhamid II was suspicious of Khalid Beg's influence and had thus posted him in Serbia to keep him away from the capital. Now that he was on his way to Tehran, the Iranian ambassador in Istanbul highly recommended that efforts should be made to take advantage of the discord between the sultan and Khalid Beg to "draw the hearts" of the Kurds as "their dispelling and disheartening would be impolitic" [*tabrid va tab'id-i anha khalaḥ-i pulitik-i davlat ast*].<sup>236</sup> The Iranian ambassador, Mu'in al-Mulk, asserted that all Kurdish tribes were essentially Iranian but since the Ottoman state had resorted to exploitation of the Kurds' religious affiliation to Porte as the channel through which to seduce the Kurds to their side, serious measures were required to draw them to Iran.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> *Guzidah-yi Asnad*, Vol. 1, 566 and 596.

<sup>236</sup> *Guzidah-yi Asnad*, Vol. 3, 164.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

The Iranian ambassador, Muhsin ibn Mazahir Mu'in al-Mulk's lengthy report on Khalid Beg contains illuminating information, which taken together, points to the anxieties of both states regarding their border populations in a period when the contours of politics in the international arena were fast changing. "We should speak to people in the language they understand. Nowadays, the language of states is that of rights. If we speak in that language, [our] rights will be preserved. Today, the main arsenal of states consists of the rights of nations."<sup>238</sup> Mu'in al-Mulk recommended that in order to protect Iran's rights in the emerging international state system, distinction ought to be made between interpersonal and official relations. In light of the distinction, he recommended that under no circumstances should the interests of the state be compromised for personal gains. Thus, in dealing with Iranian subjects in foreign countries, the Iranian state's rights, he asserted, should be relentlessly pursued in a give-and-take manner of interaction. For instance, he suggested, the Ottomans should not be allowed to conscript resident Iranian subjects or naturalize resident Iranians' children as Ottoman citizens.<sup>239</sup>

Mu'in al-Mulk urged the foreign ministry to give an especially favorable reception to Khalid Beg against the background of emergent parameters which called for binding populations to the state on ethnic and sectarian grounds. He warned against the Iranian authorities' negligence in this respect as the Ottoman sultan was conducting investigations and taking measures to create the apposite environment for the reincorporation of the alienated provincial populations. The report stated that the sultan had commissioned one of his confidantes to conduct a thorough investigation of the situation in East Anatolia, Syria, and Iraq. The findings were disconcerting to the sultan as the commissioner informed his sovereign that the inhabitants of the concerned regions

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 166.



had been estranged from the state as a result of Ottoman authorities' over-taxation and oppressive measures. The official warned that due to endemic corruption, the regions' inhabitants were attracted to the French and the Russians, who did their utmost to draw them away from the sultan. The commissioner's report, corroborated by that of Taqi al-Din Pasha, the *vali* of Baghdad, distressed the sultan as he was told that

the people of Iraq are so inclined to Shi'ism that not a year passes without two or three thousand people converting to Shi'ism, and if this trend continues for several more years, no Sunni would be left in country and everyone would be so susceptible to Iran that they would rebel against the sultan at a single motion from Iran.<sup>240</sup>

Similarly, Ali Riza Bey, the former *şehbender* [consul] of Salmas and Khoi in Iran, wrote to the sultan, blaming the resurrection of the Iranian Shi'i state for all the problems the world of Islam was facing against the onslaught of Christianity. Ali Riza Bey's description of Iran as a barrier between Muslims had far-reaching implications for Andülhamid's future project of occupying the disputed Sunni-populated border districts with Iran:

While the Sublime Sultanate worked to devastate and throw back the angry flood of Christianity, and always tried to attach the Muslims of India and China to the Supreme Caliphate, Shiism intervened like a vast uncrossable sea. This caused the Muslims of Khiva and Buhara to fall into Russian hands as it caused the Kashgar Muslims to come under the Chinese, and the Indian Muslims under the English yoke. Thus millions of Muslims are enslaved by the infidels. The memory of this treachery will endure as long as human kind ...<sup>241</sup>

In light of such alarming reports and the history of the region, the sultan's concerns were not so much misplaced. The Shi'i shrine cities of Iraq had an extensive Iranian and pro-Iranian population and had only been fully brought under central

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<sup>240</sup> *Guzidah-yi Asnad*, Vol. 3, 166.

<sup>241</sup> Quoted in Selim Deringil's "The Struggle against Shi'ism in Hamidian Iraq: A Study in Ottoman Counter-Propaganda," *Die Welt des Islams*, New Series, Bd. 30, Nr. 1/4 (1990): 49.

Ottoman control with much bloodshed in 1843 after the Ottomans invaded the rebellious residents of Karbala and massacred thousands of its inhabitants.<sup>242</sup> Iran's extraterritorial rights over its subjects, like that of its European counterparts, had also been officially recognized in 1875, giving more cause for concern regarding Iran's potential growth of influence.<sup>243</sup> Furthermore, the Qajar shahs, following the precedent set by their Safavid, Afsharid, and Zandi predecessors, had gone to war with the Ottomans over claims to the Shi'is of Iraq. Nader Shah Afshar had even tried to compel the Sunni sultans and the *ulama* that the Shi'i Ja'fari sect represented the fifth Orthodox school of Islam, hoping that special privileges could be extended to its Iranian adherents on pilgrimage to the shrine cities.<sup>244</sup>

Cognizant of this context, and alerted to the potential dangers of inaction, the sultan took prompt measures to check further entrenchment of Iran's trans-border religious authority. Among his first tasks was to conduct investigations and collect information and advice from different sources. For instance, Ali Riza Bey suggested that the sultan launch educational projects to diminish sectarian differences. A former Sheikh al-Islam put forth the idea of the creation of a sort of a secret Sunni *ulema* service to inform on seditious propaganda by Shi'i religious authorities in Iraq. Still others recommended the continuation of the policy of his predecessors' extension of largess to the shrines. In 1894, the Ottoman ambassador to Tehran, Ali Galip Bey also advised the sultan to insert his direct influence in the selection process of resident *mujtahids*, to watch

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<sup>242</sup> Juan R. I. Cole and Moojan Momen, "Mafia, Mob and Shiism in Iraq: The Rebellion of Ottoman Karbala 1824-1843," *Past & Present*, no. 112 (1986): 116. The estimated death inside the city was about 3,000 and among the nomadic Arab population, some 2,000 were killed. The Ottoman troops' loss stood at 400. See page, 137.

<sup>243</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 17.

<sup>244</sup> Stanford J. Shaw, "Iranian Relations with the Ottoman Empire in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," in *From Nadir Shah to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Gavin Hambly and Peter Avery, vol. 7, *The Cambridge History of Iran*, v. 7 (Cambridge: New York : Cambridge University Press, 1991), 307.

the movement of pilgrims to the shrine cities, to actively counter Shi'i propaganda, and to promote the notion among his Shi'i subjects that the prosperity of the Shi'i communities emanated from his imperial good graces, and finally to eliminate Iranian middle men in order to uproot Iranian influence.<sup>245</sup> The frightened sultan first commissioned Seyyid Suleiman, the *naqib* of Baghdad [the most important Sunni Muslim leader in Ottoman Iraq], a descendent of the celebrated Sufi Abdulkadir al-Gaylani, to urgently write a book in repudiation of the tenets of the Ja'fari *mazhab* of Shi'i Islam.<sup>246</sup> Then as suggested, he established *madrasas* with teachers appointed directly from Istanbul to assimilate the population with Sunni ideas. Since the use of force was out of question due to Ottoman state incapacity, nomads were to be appeased and handled with care, lest they migrate to Iran, taking resources and manpower.<sup>247</sup>

To add pomp and ceremony to the display of Sunni prestige and magnanimity, the sultan also commissioned a sanctification ceremony as part of which the mausoleums of the founder of the Sunni school of Hanafi (to which the Ottoman state subscribed), Abu Hanifah and his student Abu Yusuf were draped by special *kiswas* [cloths covering the Kaba in Mecca] from the holy Kaba in Mecca amidst celebrations and prayers. In the presence of the *vali* of Baghdad, Mushir Pasha and Yayha Nusret Pasha, chief inspectors of the VI Army, and a large number of civil and military officers, the grand *ulama* of the province received gifts of honor sent by the sultan. Then in a solemn manner, a few strands of the prophet's hair, kept in a box, were installed over the door of one of the mausoleums, which magically appeared at the first strike of a pickaxe. The solemnity and grandeur assigned to the ceremony, represented by the presence of high-ranking state

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<sup>245</sup> Selim Deringil, "The Struggle against Shiism in Hamidian Iraq: A Study in Ottoman Counter-Propaganda," *Die Welt Des Islams* 30, no. 1/4 (1990): 49–52, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1571045>.

<sup>246</sup> *Guzidah-yi Asnad*, Vol. 3, 166.

<sup>247</sup> Deringil, "The Struggle against Shiism in Hamidian Iraq," 55.

officials, constituted part of the Hamidian pan-Sunni policy of unifying the empire on a religious platform. It was also an unmistakable sign of state penetration into the periphery. The state had arrived with its ideological state apparatus to inculcate in its citizens the idea that they definitively belonged to a Sunni sovereign. The ceremony meant to remind the audience of the prestige and the imperial magnanimity of the sultan in caring for Muslim religious relics, as the sultan extended attention to Shi'i shrines as well. It was no longer simply Iranians and Shi'i patrons from India who offered funds for the upkeep of the holy sites.

However, more importantly, in a region, where ceremonies were often conducted by local Shi'i religious authorities for Shi'i saints, the sultan's special attention to such a ritual in a Sunnis site, was unquestionably intended and received as royal patronage in favor of strengthening the power and prestige of Sunni Islam over that of the Iranian-backed Shi'ism. The Iranian consul's special note to his sovereign that no invitation had been extended to him meant to convey an eerie sense of Sunni encroachment into a traditionally Shi'i turf.<sup>248</sup> But perhaps, as Selim Deringil has pointed out, the sore lack of funds, which plagued the Hamidian regime, compelled the sultan to settle for a ceremony instead of sustained institutional work, towards which he also sought to redirect meagre state resources.<sup>249</sup>

Moreover, Sultan Abülhamid II continued his predecessors' policies of regulating the nationality status of Ottoman imperial subjects. Such policies called for interfering in the individuals' private spheres and interpersonal relationships, which had long remained the prerogative of the religious leadership as guardians of their respective communities. Thus, as communal boundaries came further under the scrutiny of the modernizing state,

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<sup>248</sup> *Guzidah-yi Asnad*, Vol. 3, 561-62.

<sup>249</sup> Deringil, "The Struggle against Shiism in Hamidian Iraq," 56.

the question of who belongs to who and which state has authority over select imperial subjects became the integral part of the modern state making in both Qajar Iran and the Ottoman Empire. The archives of Qajar Iran and the Ottoman state are replete with litigations and correspondence between consuls and ambassadors of the two governments over religious issues and matters pertaining to citizenship. While such matters as inheritance, land ownership, and marital relations were being regulated in accordance with the *tanzimat* codes, the question of sectarian affiliations of communities with one state against another was becoming more conspicuous and contentious. Notably, just as the great powers had chipped away Ottoman territory on the pretext of protecting the rights of Christians of the Ottoman Empire, Iranian and Ottoman officials also waged their own legal and territorial battles which were primarily centered around their disputed shared frontiers and the shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf in Iraq and Sunni tribes of Kurdistan.

Thus, for instance, in order to curb the long established Iranian influence in Iraq, in 1866, the *vali* of Baghdad took vigorous steps to enforce a decree, stipulating that the children of resident Iranian subjects, whose mother was an Ottoman subject, were not entitled to inherit her property and thus ceased to be property-owners.<sup>250</sup> The enforcement of the new decree meant that Iranian citizens would be subject to Ottoman courts in legal violations of “mixed civil and commercial cases.”<sup>251</sup> Even though the decree was applicable across the board within Ottoman domains without any objections from other

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 231. See also Juan Cole’s and Moojan Momen’s “Mafia, Mob and Shiism in Iraq: The Rebellion of Ottoman Karbala 1824-1843,” in *Past and Present*, No. 112, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 112-143. Cole and Momen mention that in 19<sup>th</sup> century, Iranian merchants and noblemen resided there out of a pious wish to be near the shrines or because Iran turned politically dangerous for them. Although Iranian immigrants over time assimilated to Iraq, many maintained their distinctive national costume, knowledge of Persian and underground allegiance to Iran. Because of its prevailing Shiism and the large Iranian ethnic element, Ottoman officials saw Karbala as a potential fifth column,” 115.

<sup>251</sup> Nakash, *The Shi’is of Iraq*, 17.

foreign states, the Iranian *karpardaz* [consul] in Baghdad protested the decree on account of the religious persuasion of Iranian subjects in Iraq. Similarly, in 1866, the *vali* of Baghdad took it upon himself to intervene in a property dispute between two resident Iranians in favor of a female litigant, while disregarding title deeds that had been certified by Shi'i religious authorities. The Ottoman *vali*'s uncompromising stance, which was meant to further consolidate Ottoman authority over the shrine cities that had traditionally been strong bastions of support for the Iranian government, was censured by the Iranian *karguzar*, who maintained that "it is well known to all that the *ahali* of Iran [Iranian subjects] have been residents in this *vilayet* for over seven hundred years and have purchased and owned property without any objection from sultans."<sup>252</sup> Such tirades would eventually bear fruit in 1875 when Iran received extraterritorial legal rights over its subjects in Iraq.

Ottoman authorities took a step further by carving out spaces of influence among the Sunni Kurds inside Iran in such urban centers as Sine [Sanandaj] (the capital of the Aradalan emirate and present day capital city of the province of Kurdistan) and Savujbulagh, the capital city of the Mukiri district in Azerbaijan. Ottoman influence as usual infiltrated these places through merchants and the Sunni ecclesiastical classes. The merchants of Savujbulagh had extensive ties with those of Mosul and Van, providing favorable opportunities for Ottoman *şehbenders* [consuls] and Iranian Kurdish subjects to occupy an ambiguous status and play the politics of subjecthood to their advantage. A report from Mirza Sa'id Khan, the Qajar foreign minister, to Hussein Khan Mushir al-

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<sup>252</sup> *Guzidah-yi Asnad*, Vol. 3, 217, 231, and 235. Juan Cole and Moojan Momen mention that Shi'i scholars and notables saw major advantages in keeping the shrines out of Ottoman control in the 1820s, and with this aim in mind, they financed bands of mafias and roughs. They feared that extension of Ottoman control would mean Ottoman control of the lucrative shrine endowments, restriction of Shi'i rituals, and subjection of the population to Ottoman-appointed religious court judges (qadis). See Cole's and Momen's article, "Mafia, Mob and Shiism in Iraq: The Rebellion of Ottoman Karbala 1824-1843," 121.

Dowleh, the Iranian ambassador to Istanbul, dated December 14, 1869, addressed the issue of increasing Ottoman demands to protect Sunnis in Iran. According to the report, the Ottoman grand vizier Ali Pasha's objections to Iran's violation of the Ottoman state's most-favored-nation status [*kamilat al-vidad*] were untenable. The grand vizier had raised objections to the mistreatment of Ottoman subjects by the Iranian governor of Savujbulagh, Mirza Abdulvahhab Khan Naib al-Vizareh that he claimed on false information. Apparently, following a fracas between the governor's retinue and a number of Savujbulagh's residents, which had resulted in some casualties on the government's side and the detention and punishment of the rebels, the alleged culprits had claimed Ottoman nationality status in order to evade prosecution. The Ottoman authorities had swiftly responded to the culprits' appeals as it had become Ottoman policy to turn such grievances into opportunities for increasing the sultan's influence among Sunnis in Iran. Mirza Sai'd Khan asserted that the Iranian governor had justly punished Iranian subjects and that the culprits' claims of Ottoman citizenship were merely fabrications. He added that if the Porte saw no injustice in assuming the right of protesting such a small incident in diplomatic circles, why wouldn't the Porte take note of the Ottoman troops' massacre of several thousand pilgrims and settlers around the shrine cities [referring to 1843 massacre of Shi'is of Karbala in Iraq]?<sup>253</sup> This was clearly a manifestation of sectarian politics in the emerging international state system, with the Ottomans claiming protection of Sunnis while Iran assumed the responsibility to speak on behalf of Ottoman Shi'is.

The question of Ottoman and Iranian citizenship developed into a more contentious issue as the *tanzimat* codes gradually became more entrenched across the Ottoman imperial domains. In the 1870s, when the Ottoman state began to feel the sting

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<sup>253</sup> *Guzidah-yi Asnad*, Vol. 3, 432-34. See June Cole's and Moojan Momen's article, "Mafia, Mob and Shiism in Iraq: The Rebellion of Ottoman Karbala 1824-1843" for the details of the massacres.

of its widespread financial crisis, which ultimately led to bankruptcy and the establishment of the Public Debt Administration in both Cairo and the Ottoman capital, the Iranian merchants in Istanbul also suffered immeasurably.<sup>254</sup> As the crisis unfolded, widespread inflation, currency deficit, and overdue state salaries, and a marked deficiency of goods in the markets squeezed merchants and buyers hard in Istanbul. In 1870, the Iranian embassy in the Ottoman capital reported about the adverse impact of the financial crisis on the Iranian business class in the city. In the midst of the economic recession, the embassy officials faced a dilemma in addressing litigations involving debt collection. Nazim al-Dowleh first categorized Istanbul resident Iranian subjects into two primary groups of contractors working for merchants inside Iran and tobacco dealers and guildsmen. Then he complained of the complications created by the Porte's recent enactment of a law, which stipulated that anyone born to an Ottoman subject or resident in the Ottoman domains for a period of five years, would be entitled to Ottoman nationality status [*taba'yyat*]. The dilemma was that since the publication of the recent law in Ottoman newspapers, indebted Iranian residents had started applying for Ottoman nationality in order to escape prosecution by the authorities of the Iranian embassy. The Iranian merchants of Istanbul exploited the opportunity, causing disconcert among the officials who feared that such a trend of switching nationalities meant Iran's loss of valuable human resources, capital, and influence in the Ottoman Empire. Application of the traditional Iranian method of punishment by bastinado was of course out of the question as "trials in this country are conducted according to the law, and even a slight violation of it would immediately become grounds for the foreigners and the Ottomans

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<sup>254</sup> Halil İnalcık and Donald Quataert, eds., *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1914* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 764.



alike to label one with savagery and uncivility and journalists would expose the details of the affair, causing embarrassment and dishonor.”<sup>255</sup>

The evidence presented above suggests that in the wake of the inauguration of the *tanzimat* reforms, especially after the Crimean War (1853-56), both states became more involved in trying to increase their influence across their borders through investing in the protection of their subjects and coreligionists. While Abdülhamid II, and to a lesser degree, his predecessors, were the acknowledged representatives of the world’s more numerous Sunni population as caliphs of the Ottoman Empire, Naser al-Din Shah had similarly styled himself “the sultan of the Shi’is.”<sup>256</sup> This was not an entirely new claim as both Safavid and Qajar states had challenged the universality of Ottoman claims to sovereignty over all Muslims.<sup>257</sup> In fact, the Safavids had strenuously contested the Ottomans’ claim to be the sole sovereigns of Islam and reserved that title for themselves.<sup>258</sup> Similarly, polemically, there was no novelty in seeking to extend protection to the subjects and religious communities beyond imperial domains of a sovereign state, but to turn this into official state policy and launch extensive propaganda to win over target populations beyond borders belonged to the modern world and the realm of great power politics.

Thus, an ancillary consequence of the Crimean War and the Kurdish-Iranian conflict under Sheikh Ubeydullah was the radical transformation of the great powers’ attitude towards the small Christian communities of Urmia, Salmas, and Solduz. Russia had pioneered raising of sectarian demands under the pretext of protecting the Orthodox

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<sup>255</sup> *Guzidah-yi asnad*, Vol. 3, 245-47 and 261.

<sup>256</sup> Abbas Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe: Nasir Al-Din Shah Qajar and the Iranian Monarchy* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 234.

<sup>257</sup> Deringil, “The Struggle against Shiism in Hamidian Iraq,” 46.

<sup>258</sup> Ann K. S Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 212–13.

Christians of Iran and the Ottoman Empire since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. This trend accelerated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, in 1838, when the Porte's centralization drive was in full swing in Kurdistan and the Iranian state tried to extend its central control to the domains of the Kurdish frontier lord, Yahya Khan of Salmas, Russia, reacting to a petition for protection by the Armenian patriarch of Uch Kilisa, called on the Iranian authorities to take measures to check Kurdish depredations against the Armenian community of Salmas.<sup>259</sup> Such a posturing as the patron of Christians in Iran would increase dramatically towards the end of the century as Russia would assume a more domineering role in Azerbaijan.

Having suffered greatly during the Kurdish campaigns and government retaliatory expeditions in 1880, the small Christian communities of northwest Iran received a disproportionate amount of attention from both British and Russian governments henceforth. Britain had already established a strong footing among the Nestorian Christians through the Protestant missionary connection. Protection of the American Protestant missionary interests was particularly attractive to the British. After all, this connection allowed the British to entrench their influence indirectly among the Eastern Christians through Protestant missionary work. In other words, they could retain a footing in the Russian zone of influence in northwest Iran without having to offer direct political representation, which often served as "a powerful incentive for Eastern Christians to affiliate themselves with the Western missionary enterprises."<sup>260</sup>

By 1890, the British-protected American missionary enterprise had become the leading missionary network, with the French Lazarists following in tow. After the

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<sup>259</sup> *Guzidah-yi Asnad*, Vol. 1, 536.

<sup>260</sup> Eleanor Harvey Tejirian and Reeva S. Simon, *Conflict, Conquest, and Conversion: Two Thousand Years of Christian Missions in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 113.

transfer of the missions in Turkey and Persia from the ABCFM to the Presbyterian Church in 1870, the Armenians and Nestorian Christians of Urmia and Hakkari had come under the exclusive focus of the Protestant missionaries. Like their Catholic rivals, the Americans had reconciled themselves to the idea of establishing evangelical churches in the face of opposition they had encountered from the Armenian and Nestorian ecclesiastical hierarchies. The Anglican missionaries of the Archbishop of Canterbury also joined the race in 1886 by establishing a mission among the Nestorians of Urmia and Hakkari in 1886.<sup>261</sup>

Although both the American and Anglican missionaries' avowed policy of political neutrality was frequently emphasized, the missionaries' very presence and exclusive attention to the welfare and education of the local Christians complicated matters. It was a tough challenge for the missionaries to retain their policy of neutrality as they frequently made representations on behalf of Nestorian and Armenian communities through British and French consuls. As J. F. Coakley has suggested, the missionaries' presence was indeed political, and it was seen as political by European colonial and Ottoman and Iranian imperial authorities and local communities alike.<sup>262</sup> While the missionaries' presence had always been political, they were be more deeply drawn into the political whirlpool in the high tide of imperialism at the end of the long 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> For a detailed discussion of the American missionary enterprise in Urmia and their relations with the Urmia and Hakkari Nestorians see John Joseph, *The Nestorians and their Muslim neighbors: a study of western influence on their relations* (Princeton Oriental Studies, 1961); Adam Becker, *Revival and awakening: American evangelical missionaries in Iran and the origins of Assyrian nationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015);

<sup>262</sup> J. F Coakley, *The Church of the East and the Church of England: A History of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Assyrian Mission* (Oxford [England]; New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1992), 123.

<sup>263</sup> Michael Zirinsky, "American Presbyterian Missionaries at Urmia during the Great War," ed. Oliver Bast, *La Perse la grande guerre* (Tehran: Institute Français de Recherche en Iran, 2002).

The American missionaries' involvement in the Kurdish revolt in 1880 serves as an exemplary instance of how their commitment to political neutrality was compromised. Amidst the raging hostilities between the Kurdish tribes, who had laid siege to Urmia, suspicion against the American missionaries and the Nestorians became unmistakably pronounced as the Shi'i inhabitants of Urmia perceived the missionaries' efforts at mediation in the conflict as tantamount to assistance to the Kurdish invaders. During the war, British consul Abbott and the American Dr. Joseph Cochran served as intermediary envoys, transmitting messages between the two camps. This involvement and the sympathetic treatment the American missionaries, the British consul, and the Nestorians received from Sheikh Ubeydullah gave rise to the myth of British designs to aid the Kurdish war effort. In the context of such serious suspicions, it was Abbott's diplomatic endeavors with the Iranian authorities that averted spontaneous mob attacks on the American colony. Interestingly, such unfounded rumors of British support for the Kurds have persisted in Iranian historiographical literature to this day.<sup>264</sup>

The long-serving British consul at Tabriz, William G. Abbott, who was urged by the British government to inspect the Nestorian country with a mission of fact-finding, had met with many Nestorian village heads in 1880 before the hostilities broke out. He prepared a detailed inventory of the conditions and agreements under which Nestorians worked for the Afshar khans. In 1881, Abbott's report formed the basis for discussion in the House of Commons in London, which subsequently issued recommendations for the improvement of the conditions of the Nestorian communities. After the war, through

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<sup>264</sup> See for instance, Yusuf Bayg Babapur et al., *Fitnah-i shaykh 'Ubayd Allah Kurd: guzarish'hayi az vaqay'i-i hamlah-i Akrad bih safahat-i Azarbayjan dar dawrah-i Qajar* (Tihran: Kitabkhanah, Muzih va Markaz-i Asnad-i Majlis-i Shura-yi Islami, 2012). The unfounded belief that the Kurds received support from the British Consul and the American missionaries originated from 'Alī ibn Amīrlūyah Khān Afshār Urūmī, *Tārīkh-i Akrād : sharh-i vāqi'ah-'i hamlah-'i Shaykh 'Ubayd Allāh Kurd bih Āzarbāyjān dar sāl-i 1297 Q.* (Tihrān: Mūzih va Markaz-i Asnād-i Majlis-i Shūrā-yi Islāmī, 2014). The book was written a few years after the revolt and thus reflects the biased viewpoint of the Shi'i Urmia residents.

representations by Abbott and Samuel Benjamin, the newly appointed American minister at Tehran, the American missionaries and their Nestorian beneficiaries received renewed assurances of protection from the shah. A legal board, under the supervision of the missionaries, was also recognized by royal decree, reinforcing the previous protected status of the Nestorians under the care of the office of the Sarparast [government appointed local representative of the Christians].<sup>265</sup> The Kurdish uprising and news of atrocities also prompted leading Nestorians to petition the Archbishop of Canterbury to send missionaries to Azerbaijan, where they soon started an Anglican mission among the Nestorians in 1886.<sup>266</sup>

The Russian government, which had thus far stayed away from directly involving itself in the affairs of the Nestorian Christians of Urmia, also began to express keen interest in the community to check increased Protestant influence. The promotion and strengthening of the Russian Orthodox Church's hold over Middle Eastern domains under the shah and the sultan had formed the basis of Russian policy since the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainarji in 1774. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Tsar Nicholas I had gone to war to stop the Porte's policy objective "to undermine the political and social position of the Orthodox Church in the Near East and thereby to strike at Russian influence throughout the region."<sup>267</sup> Russia's *casus belli* grounded in such starkly religious motivations was not an anomaly as competing European states along with the Ottoman government all sought to recast Orthodoxy in such a way to secure the allegiance of the Orthodox

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<sup>265</sup> See Robert E. (Robert Elliott) Speer, "*The Hakim Sahib.*" *The Foreign Doctor; a Biography of Joseph Plumb Cochran, M. D., of Persia* (New York, Chicago [etc.]: Fleming H. Revell company, [c1911]).

<sup>266</sup> Church of England, Assyrian Mission, and Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (Great Britain), "Archbishop's Mission to the Assyrian Christians: Quarterly Paper," *Archbishop's Mission to the Assyrian Christians: Quarterly Paper.*, 1890.

<sup>267</sup> Jack Fairey, "Russia's Quest for the Holy Grail: Relics, Liturgics, and Great-Power Politics in the Ottoman Empire" in Lucien J. Frary and Mara Kozelsky, *Russian-Ottoman Borderlands: The Eastern Question Reconsidered* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 132.

Christian communities. This was the primary concern that pitted St. Petersburg against the Porte in the Crimean War. By the 1850s, “Religious institutions in themselves,” Jack Fairey has noted, “provided an important venue for political competition, as states attempted to project “soft power” not only along confessional lines but *across* them.”<sup>268</sup> Thus, coterminous with territorial annexation of Ottoman domains under the pretext of protecting Orthodox Christians, Russia competed with other powers to invest religious sites, relics and symbols with its “own distinctive political stamp.”<sup>269</sup>

The convenient proximity of Russia’s Caucasian possessions allowed its authorities to project political and cultural hegemony into Ottoman East Anatolia and the Iranian province of Azerbaijan. In the process, claims to representation of the Armenians and Russian subjects furnished suitable excuses. As such, the renewed British Anglican enterprise embodied in Abbott’s tour of inspection of the Nestorian country in Urmia, in 1881 and 1882 prompted Petroff, the Russian consul, to embark on a similar tour. Azerbaijan, as the backdoor to the Russian Caucasus from East Anatolia, which had ostensibly fallen under British influence following the Congress of Berlin, was strategically too important for Russia to allow the influence of its British rival to go unchecked.

The suspicious Turkish consul at Tabriz, Behjet Effendi was tipped off by his colleague in Urmia that the Nestorians of Gavilan village had submitted a petition to the Russian consul, proclaiming their wish to receive Russian protection. Russia’s policy of further consolidating its foothold in the province through supporting its numerous Armenian subjects’ business initiatives posed a grave threat to the Ottoman officials, who were well aware that civil claims were merely a disguise for extension of political

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<sup>268</sup> Frary and Kozelsky, 135.

<sup>269</sup> Frary and Kozelsky, 136.

influence. This was unacceptable to the Porte, especially as Russia had taken sides with the Iranian government in the frontier question and had also sought to persuade Iran into alliance against the Porte during the Crimean war and the war of 1877-78.<sup>270</sup> Russian authorities had pressed Istanbul to make reparations to the Iranian government for the damages caused during the Kurdish invasion. They had also stationed troops along their Caucasian frontier with Iran, when the property of Russian Armenian subjects such as Majid Khan had been destroyed around Savujbulagh.<sup>271</sup> Furthermore, echoing the Iranian governments' grievances, Russia had exerted pressure on the Porte to expel Sheikh Ubeydullah from his residence in the vicinity of the frontiers. To communicate the extent of their opposition to the sheikh's project, the Russians had taken a step further by calling off Simon Agha, who had served the sheikh as his chief of staff both during and after the 1880 campaigns.<sup>272</sup>

In the wake of the banishment of Sheikh Ubeydullah, the new Amir-i Nizam's [Hassan Ali Khan, the former governor of Savujbulagh] vigorous efforts at pacification of the frontiers had proved effective. The Kurdish frontier ridges had fallen silent temporarily. But they wouldn't stay quiet for long. Having functioned as a political backwater for centuries, the northern Ottoman-Iranian frontier zone was now the focal point of an unprecedented level of imperial state competition.<sup>273</sup> The Iranian government had managed to restore order by falling back on local support but frontier disputes persisted to become only further complicated with the rise of Armenian revolutionary activities. Having failed to secure communal representation at the local level, and an

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<sup>270</sup> Candan Badem, *Ottoman Crimean War, 1853-1856* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2010). See also Abbas Amanat's *Pivot of the Universe*, 249.

<sup>271</sup> M. S Lazarev and Kawus Qeftan, *Kêşey Kurd: 1896-1917*, vol. 1 (Baghdād: Maṭba'at al-Jāhiz), 71.

<sup>272</sup> Abbott to Thomson, Tabreez, no. 7, January 31, 1881, (FO 248/382).

<sup>273</sup> Michael A. Reynolds, "Abdurrezzak Bedirhan: Ottoman Kurd and Russophile in the Twilight of Empire," *Kritika* 12, no. 2 (March 22, 2011): 415–16.

outright exclusion from all great power reform visions, the Sunni Kurdish tribes of the frontier progressively became more receptive to Abdülhamid's recasting of Ottomanism as an expressly Islamic identity. In the post-Ubeydullah era, the Ottoman state would passionately stake its frontier claims on the basis of the Iranian Kurdish tribes' Sunni persuasion and the Porte's responsibility to protect Sunni subjects. Thus, Sheikh Ubeydullah's revolt, however unsuccessful it may have proven in obtaining political gains for the Kurds, had nevertheless made a vast contribution to the increasingly assertive Ottoman policy of securing the Kurdish tribes' loyalty on sectarian grounds.

#### **IRANIAN AZERBAIJAN: PROTESTS, REVOLUTIONARIES, THE HAMIDIYE CAVALRY CORPS, AND THE IRANIAN KURDS:**

By 1890, a decade after the Kurdish revolt, Russia's commercial and political dominance over northern Iran and the province of Azerbaijan had become undisputed. Russia's southward expansion into the Caucasus had halted at the borders of Azerbaijan by the exigencies of the Eastern Question and the Great Game in Central Asia. As a result of Russian hegemony in the Caucasus, which extended into northern Iran through the vigorous commercial activities of its subjects, Azerbaijan assumed more strategic import.<sup>274</sup> First of all, Azerbaijan was the most populous province of the shah's guarded domains and was endowed with the richest agricultural lands in the monarchy. Its contribution to the royal coffers and the national food supply was so enormous that Lord Curzon had dubbed it 'the granary of Persia.'<sup>275</sup> More importantly, the province served as the seat of the Qajar monarchy's crown prince. Thus, while the British could and did interfere in Ottoman East Anatolia by way of their outside influence in the Eastern

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<sup>274</sup> Firuz Kazemzadeh, *Russia and Britain in Persia: Imperial Ambitions in Qajar Iran* (New York: I.B.Tauris, 2013), 4–7.

<sup>275</sup> George N Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question*, vol. II (London and New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1892), 515.



Question, in Azerbaijan, Russia was determined to monopolize imperialist advances. Russia's support for Iran in restoration of the disputed border district of Kotur in the Treaty of Berlin represented only one step in the direction of rival other powers' sway in its exclusive zone of influence.

Russia's growing political and commercial influence in Azerbaijan since the 1830s had also stimulated the Iranian economy and strengthened Azerbaijan's trade networks with Europe, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia via routes passing through Tiflis and Trabzon to the Black Sea. By mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Tabriz had become the largest urban center of Iran and its trade volume vastly outsized any other place in the monarchy. Writing around 1860, British consul Keith E. Abbott noted that the city served as a main entrepot for trade between Europe and northern Iran. "Tabreez," he said, "has now become the principle seat of Commerce in all Persia and is the point from which nearly all the Northern and Midland Countries are supplied with the produce and manufactures of Europe conveyed to it chiefly by land-transport from the Black Sea."<sup>276</sup> The abundance of trade with Europe and Russia had increased customs revenues dramatically, giving Azerbaijan an important place in replenishing the treasury.<sup>277</sup> Prominent European powers established consulates and a small colony of European merchants engaged in trade. Despite the challenges of the inherent difficulty of land-transport routes and a general lack of security, favorable tariff rates and customs dues provided large incentives.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Keith Edward Abbott and Abbas Amanat, *Cities & Trade: Consul Abbott on the Economy and Society of Iran 1847-1866*, Oxford Oriental Monographs, no. 5 (London: Published by Ithaca Press for the Board of the Faculty of Oriental Studies, Oxford University, 1983), 218..

<sup>277</sup> James D Clark, *Provincial Concerns: A Political History of the Iranian Province of Azerbaijan, 1848-1906* (Costa Mesa (Calif.): Mazda, 2006), 139–42. See also Muḥammad Ḥasan Khān Itimād al-Saltanah, *Mir'āt al-Buldān*, vol. 1, eds. 'Abd al-Ḥusayn Navā'ī and Mīr Hāshim Muḥaddis (Tih-rān: Mu'assasah-'i Intishārāt va Chāp-i Dānishgāh-i Tih-rān), 561.

<sup>278</sup> See Denis Wright, *The English amongst the Persians: During the Qajar Period 1787-1921* (London: Heinemann, 1977) for detailed biographical sketches of the English diplomats, consuls and merchants. The

Between the 1840s and 1870s, the Iranian merchant population benefited greatly from the extensive trade between Tabriz and Europe. After the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the Russo-Ottoman war of 1877-78, trade gradually began to shift away to the Persian Gulf, leaving its adverse impression on the populations of Azerbaijan. Despite the slowdown in the economic boom, however, trade made vast contributions to growth in population and trans-border connections.<sup>279</sup> Through the networks of migrant Iranian workers established at places such as the Baku oil industry in the Caucasus and through Iranian merchants in Istanbul, St. Petersburg, and elsewhere in European capitals came new ideas and concepts of governance. Iranian emigres began to establish contacts with Armenian communities and imbibe socialist revolutionary ideologies in the Caucasus. During the constitutional revolution in Tabriz (1906-1911), these ideologies would become crucial in helping Iranians to frame a general inchoate popular discontent in the form of modern political ideologies such as socialism, democracy, and anarchism.<sup>280</sup>

Moreover, by the 1890s, the British policy of ‘practical cooperation’, pursued by Lord Salisbury, had come to an end as Britain gradually drifted away from the central powers towards making long-term commitments to the Triple Alliance. Such reconstitution of Britain’s European policy lines inevitably affected British position in other parts of the world. In Iran, this foreign policy shift was reflected in the relinquishment of control and influence to Russia in the north, anticipating an end to the Great Game in Asia in the form of the 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention. British-Russian rivalry had reduced Iranian position to such an extent that Iran “no longer had a policy

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majority of the British consuls in Tabriz such as James Brant, the Abbotts and Stevens fulfilled the dual role of consuls and merchants. The Stevens, for instance, often covered for the British consuls while on vacation or tours of inspection around Azerbaijan or preoccupied with the border demarcation.

<sup>279</sup> Charles Issawi, “The Tabriz-Trabzon Trade, 1830-1900: Rise and Decline of a Route,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 1, no. 1 (1970): 18–27.

<sup>280</sup> Touraj Atabaki, *Azerbaijan: Ethnicity and Autonomy in Twentieth-Century Iran* (London ; New York : New York: British Academy Press ; Distributed by St Martin’s Press, 1993).

beyond her frontiers. All that her diplomats could do was to keep a precarious balance amidst the tensions produced by Anglo-Russian rivalry.”<sup>281</sup> The pro-Russian outlooks of such prominent Iranian officials as Amin al-Sultan and the Amir-i Nizam in the wake of the Tobacco Regie protests in 1891 were indicative of Russia’s growing dominance over Iranian politics, which provided fodder for more strident anti-foreign popular protests.<sup>282</sup> Thus, it was not surprising that in 1890, the Russian consul called the shots in Tabriz, self-assured as he was of his government’s supremacy and his own secure position among the well-represented Russian subjects of the city. With good reason, the British consul at Tabriz noted in the same year that his Russian colleague considered the appointment of the *karguzar*, [an agent of the Foreign Ministry], an inviolable Russian prerogative.<sup>283</sup> In 1898, Russian activity in Iran intensified as “the Russian government began a large-scale political and economic offensive that gradually gave Russia almost complete control of Naser al-Din Shah’s successor, Muzaffar al-Din.”<sup>284</sup>

Increased Russian and British dominance over Iranian politics coincided with a marked deterioration of Qajar misadministration. In the second half of Naser al-Din Shah’s reign, financial mismanagement coupled with the shah’s expensive trips abroad compelled the monarch to offer concessions to foreign merchants, furthering the financial burden on the population. His excessive demands for revenue collection through tax-farming and the selling of government offices spelled disaster for the impoverished population who had been entirely deprived of the modernization schemes and trade

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<sup>281</sup> Firuz Kazemzadeh, “Relations with Russia and the Soviet Union,” in *From Nadir Shah to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Gavin Hambly and Peter Avery, vol. 7, *The Cambridge History of Iran*, v. 7 (Cambridge: New York : Cambridge University Press, 1991), 341.

<sup>282</sup> Rose Louise Greaves, *British Policy in Persia, 1892-1903* (London: University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1965), 34–35.

<sup>283</sup> Stevens to Wolff, Tabriz, April 16, 1890, FO 248/505

<sup>284</sup> Kazemzadeh, “Relations with Russia,” 342.

imbalance from abroad. Fluctuating prices in the global market also struck the populace hard as the Iranian administrative practices became generally more chaotic and the monarchy became more decentralized with local governors lording it over their provincial turfs.<sup>285</sup>

Dissatisfaction with government corruption and foreign commercial control initially surfaced in Tabriz in the form of riots against the Tobacco Regie in 1890-91. The Muslim merchant population led the way as they figured prominently among those who suffered from trade imbalance and government over-taxation.<sup>286</sup> The *bazaaris* found ready support among both the Iranian immigrant workers and intelligentsia in the Caucasus and Tabriz and a number of the Shi'i *ulama*. Unlike in the Ottoman Empire where a thriving middle-class population and a strong tradition of reforms within the state structure led to the ascent of a potent constitutional coalition of bureaucrats and army officers, Iran's decentralized government structure coupled with a thin middle class led to the coherence of the popular movement against foreign domination under clerical leadership.<sup>287</sup> The *ulama* of Tabriz addressed petitions to the shah to overturn what they saw as the supervision of Muslims by unbelievers. Thus, believing the concession to be contrary to Islam, "they said they would fight to save the faith."<sup>288</sup> Fliers were distributed in the city that issued stiff warnings against bystanders who failed to stand in solidarity with the protesters:

Woe to those Ulemas who will not cooperate with the nation! Woe to those who will not spend their lives and property! Anyone of the Ulemas who will not agree

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<sup>285</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 30–45.

<sup>286</sup> Firuz Kazemzadeh, *Russia and Britain in Persia, 1864-1914: A Study in Imperialism*, Yale Russian and East European Studies 6 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 255–56.

<sup>287</sup> Nader Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire And Iran* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 14–17.

<sup>288</sup> Clark, *Provincial Concerns*, 232. James D Clark, *Provincial Concerns: A Political History of the Iranian Province of Azerbaijan, 1848-1906* (Costa Mesa (Calif.): Mazda, 2006), 232.

with the people will lose his life. Woe to anyone who may sell one muskal [*mesqal*] of Tobacco to enforce these customs of the Infidels! We will kill the Europeans first and then plunder their property. Woe to the Armenians who will be killed and will lose their property and their families! Woe to those who will keep quiet!<sup>289</sup>

The shah's frantic efforts to check the movement were futile. The emissary he sent off to Tabriz to pacify the crowds through appeasing the *ulama* such as Mirza Javad Agha was not even allowed into town. The crowds ridiculed the shah's emissary. They parodied the official by tying a piece of paper around the neck of a blind and deaf dog that meant to represent the shah's concession. The crown prince had to intervene by personally escorting the emissary into town. Faced with such strident opposition, the shah had no choice but to capitulate and cancel the deal. He did so but not before recalling the powerful Amir-i Nizam for having refused to execute his orders.<sup>290</sup>

#### **BETWEEN THE SULTAN AND THE TSAR: ARMENIAN REVOLUTIONARIES AND THE HAMIDIYE MILITIA:**

Such developments in Iran resonated across the borders. Sultan Abdülhamid II also tried to capitalize on Islam as a medium through which to knit together “the Muslim elements of the empire into a cohesive new core of identity.”<sup>291</sup> The sultan's policy emerged in reaction to continued loss of Ottoman territory and the perceived failure of the *tanzimat* and it was meant “to create a new, shared sense of Ottomanism, by focusing upon mobilising the Muslims of the empire into a more robust political unit.”<sup>292</sup> As East Anatolia represented the most vulnerable frontier region prone to Russian encroachments,

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<sup>289</sup> Translation, Kennedy to Salisbury, Gulahek, no. 190, July 27, 1891, (FO 60/553), quoted in Kazemzadeh, *Russia and Britain in Persia*, 257-58.

<sup>290</sup> Clark, *Provincial Concerns*, 233-36.

<sup>291</sup> M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 130. M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 130.

<sup>292</sup> Donald Bloxham, “Terrorism and Imperial Decline: The Ottoman-Armenian Case,” *European Review of History: Revue Européenne D’histoire* 14, no. 3 (September 1, 2007): 302.

the sultan's pan-Sunni policy had its boldest manifestation there. In this region, imperial frontier security imperatives bred excruciating anxieties for the Porte as overlapping frontier populations had lately attracted outside attention from the great powers. In the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was against the context of such a "neo-conservative politico-religious backlash" from the Hamidian regime and the escalation of Armenian revolutionary militancy that intercommunal relations descended into extreme outbursts of sectarian violence.<sup>293</sup>

The intercommunal violence of the 1890s emerged as a result of complications over the Armenian Question, which became a new development in the larger Eastern Question in 1878. To reverse Russia's 'excessive' gains in Ottoman East Anatolia in the form of the Treaty of San Stefano, the British engineered a new one, the Treaty of Berlin, stripping Russia of many of its acquired possessions. Activist Armenians, and a group led by Mkritch Khrimian, lobbied in European capitals and presented their case to both the British government in London and the representatives of the European powers in Berlin. Despite such energetic measures, European interests overshadowed those of the Armenian and their case was taken up almost "as an afterthought."<sup>294</sup> Instead of autonomy on the Lebanese model, Article 61 of the new treaty simply obliged the Porte to renew its pledges to carry out a set of reforms and improvements without delay.

Armenian activists and leaders were largely disappointed in the immediate results. The Archbishop Khrimian, who headed the Armenian delegation to London and Berlin, returned to Constantinople in deep despondency. In a famous sermon, he gave an apt description of the situation of the Armenian claimants at Berlin. "There, he said, the European diplomats had placed on the table a 'dish of liberty'. The Bulgarians, Serbs and

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<sup>293</sup> Hanioglu, *A Brief History*, 131. See also, Donald Bloxham, "Terrorism and Imperial Decline", 302.

<sup>294</sup> Jeremy Salt, *Imperialism, Evangelism and the Ottoman Armenians, 1878-1896* (Routledge, 2013), 48.

Montenegrins had taken their portions of the tasty *harissa* with their iron spoons; but the Armenians had only a paper spoon, which collapsed when they tried to partake.”<sup>295</sup> Despite such dissatisfaction by a number of Armenian leaders, the mere acknowledgement of the Armenian question was initially seen as a great achievement and hailed as such.<sup>296</sup>

However, it took the Armenian elites little time to realize that British interest in the Armenian Question had been largely motivated by its overriding concern to check Russia’s influence in the region.<sup>297</sup> For some Armenians, the disillusionment sent the message that in order to achieve greater autonomy, the Armenians had to seize it from the Ottoman state and the great powers. Thus, for the small number of Armenians, who were consumed by such aspirations, the 1880s marked the transition from peaceful protests and lobbying to violent armed struggle. Heedless or ignorant of the centrality of geopolitics in the interstate competition of the hightide of late 19<sup>th</sup> century imperialism, fast-emerging Armenian revolutionary societies took the declarations of the powers at face value and began militant action to provoke great power intervention on behalf of their co-religionists in Ottoman East Anatolia. Russia’s recent military action against the Ottoman Empire, ostensibly to aid Bulgarian revolutionaries, merely strengthened their belief in the effectiveness of armed insurrection in securing international support.<sup>298</sup>

Armenian armed struggle presented itself as an opportunity structure as a result of the convergence of several processes. First of all, Armenians were widely distributed

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<sup>295</sup> Walker, *Armenia*, 117.

<sup>296</sup> Walker, 113–14.

<sup>297</sup> A few days before the Congress of Berlin, the British signed a bilateral agreement with the Porte to defend the Ottoman Empire’s Asiatic frontier against future Russian aggression, in return for which Britain was allowed to lease the island of Cypress for strategic defense.

<sup>298</sup> Jeremy Salt, *Imperialism, Evangelism and the Ottoman Armenians, 1878-1896* (Routledge, 2013), 53.

over Ottoman East Anatolia and the Russian Caucasus, which meant that they were exposed to considerably different economic, cultural, and ideological spheres. Secondly, the economic ascendancy of Armenian merchant and industrial classes in the Russian Caucasus coincided with the influx of foreign missions to the region, leading to increased access to educational opportunities. Thirdly, the Armenian religious institutions were also transformed as a result of Russian policies of incorporating the Armenian church within the state administration. The increased power of the synod vis-à-vis the catholicos led to increased state control over the church affairs and educational policies.

As a result of missionary activity and transformation of the church structure, an Armenian literary language gradually emerged, connecting Armenian communities across the borders in the Caucasus, East Anatolia, India, Europe, and America. Finally, Russia's revolutionary movement against tsarist autocracy influenced certain Armenian individuals who began to apply those ideas to what they slowly came to perceive as an Armenian nation divided by haphazard borders. Thus, the smaller Caucasian Armenian population's economic and cultural transformation occurred in contradistinction to that of their coreligionists in East Anatolia, who were more numerous and economically less advantaged. Such an economic and political contrast enabled Armenian communities in transition to conceive of their Ottoman coreligionists as integral parts of a uniform nation chafing under oppressive Muslim rule. If the Armenian peasants in East Anatolia did not share this perspective, it was incumbent on their more advantaged Caucasian brethren to awaken them to the reality that they belonged to the same nation and thus were entitled to seek their rights as a distinct national community.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> Walker, *Armenia*, 85–1900.



In Ottoman East Anatolia, the Armenian sociopolitical structure had also changed dramatically since the inauguration of the *tanzimat* in 1839 and the advent of foreign missionaries. As in the Caucasus, but on a more limited scale, literacy increased and European concessions opened up economic opportunities to certain Armenian traders in East Anatolia. The Armenian *amira* class's exclusive hold over the election of the patriarchate of Istanbul was also loosened in 1860 when a document, called the *Nizamname-i Millet-i Ermeniyan* (Regulation of the Armenian Millet), was drafted by Armenians and ratified by the Porte.<sup>300</sup> The regulation of the election of the patriarch of Istanbul allowed for more politically active bishops such as Mkritch Khrimian to enter the office of the patriarchate (1869-1873) and draw attention to the difficult conditions of the Armenian peasantry in East Anatolia.<sup>301</sup> Meanwhile, through missionary work and increased literacy and economic opportunities, Armenian communal consciousness had increased even as arguably the Armenian communities' economic and political situation had not improved in accordance with the stipulations of the European-led Ottoman reforms. The slow implementation of the *tanzimat* reforms of subject equality, combined with increased Christian consciousness of Ottoman inequality, contributed to the development of what Ronald G. Suni has termed a sense of 'relative deprivation' among Armenians.<sup>302</sup>

Moreover, during the 1880s, the Ottoman state fell into a deep financial crisis, which further challenged its capacity to reestablish full authority in East Anatolia after the devastating Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-78. As such, the impoverished state of the Kurdish and Armenian peasantry at the hands of landed and *ashiret* elites also increased,

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<sup>300</sup> Walker, 99.

<sup>301</sup> Walker, 103.

<sup>302</sup> Bloxham, "Terrorism and Imperial Decline," 303.

leading certain Armenian activists and leaders to believe that only the use of force would urge the powers to act on their behalf. Moreover, Abdülhamid II's overt appeals to the pan-Islamic policy of imperial unity convinced Armenian leaders that the Ottoman state intentionally did not want to enforce the reforms promised by article 61 of the Berlin Treaty.

However, unfortunately for the Armenians, by the time their protests assumed the form of armed struggle in the 1890s, international politics involving the Eastern Question had shifted considerably, granting Abdülhamid II latitude to leverage the change to his advantage. As Donald Bloxham has put it,

[I]t is no exaggeration to say that the Armenian question was born as the international politics of the eastern question intersected with the agrarian question, the question of demographic change in Anatolia, and the development of Armenian national consciousness, all at the inauspicious moment at which Abdülhamid was seeking to re-establish the state's control of its own destiny by a different and more religiously exclusive modernisation agenda.<sup>303</sup>

By the 1890s, following a decade of sporadic armed struggle in small pockets across East Anatolia, the Armenian revolutionary activity had begun to assume a more coherent organization. In the face of such bold attempts at asserting Armenian power, Sultan Abdülhamid II made vigorous efforts to win over the Kurdish tribes. The sultan devised a novel strategy for drawing the disaffected Kurdish tribes into the imperial orbit and combating the threat posed by Armenian revolutionaries. He commissioned his relative, Mushir Zeki Pasha, to create a Kurdish frontier guard on the model of the Russian Cossack brigades in the Caucasus in 1891.<sup>304</sup> His aim was three-pronged: to protect the vulnerable frontiers of southeastern Anatolia; to use Hamidiye regiments as a deterrent against the rising tide of Armenian revolutionary activities; and ultimately to

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<sup>303</sup> Bloxham, "Terrorism and Imperial Decline," 305–306.

<sup>304</sup> Warkworth, *Notes from a Diary in Asiatic Turkey by Lord Warkworth*. (London: E. Arnold, 1898), 134.

leverage the Hamidiye institution as a civilizing mission with the aim of settling the Kurdish tribes and turning them into loyal Ottoman subjects.<sup>305</sup> Thus established as an immediate solution to the Kurdish tribes' disaffection and a long-term plan for incorporating them within the Ottoman state structure, the Hamidiye Light Cavalry would serve as the Ottoman counter reform to that of the great powers', which had completely left out the Kurds in favor of an exclusively Christian-focused reform project.

The atrocities of the Hamidiye Light Cavalry against the Armenian populations of southeastern Anatolia throughout 1894-96 have been documented in various accounts and their discussion in detail would be redundant. The depredations of the Hamidiye regiments against the Armenian and Kurdish peasantry have been, by and large, analyzed in connection with Abdülhamid's pan-Islamic policies as a means to neutralize the threat posed by the activities of Armenian revolutionary bands. The impact the Armenian-Kurdish conflict had on the Ottoman Kurdish social organization has also been somewhat studied.<sup>306</sup> However, the effect of the Ottoman policy of investing East Anatolia's Kurdish tribes with state-sanctioned prerogatives in the context of the Porte's border disputes with Iran, creating loyal subjects against the threat of a Shi'i Iran and Armenian revolutionaries, and the sectarianization of intercommunal relations inside Iranian Azerbaijan have received little, if any attention. The argument that the Ottoman authorities' suspicions towards the Armenian community led to giving preferential treatment to the region's Muslim communities under the Hamidian regime is valid. However, such an explanation is not sufficient and only produces an incomplete picture of the causes for the breakdown of intercommunal relations and the emergence of

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<sup>305</sup> Janet Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011).

<sup>306</sup> See Klein, *The Margins of Empire*.

endemic sectarian tensions in East Anatolia and, more specifically, beyond the Ottoman frontiers in western Azerbaijan. The following section explores this aspect.

The Armenians revolutionaries' adoption of violent means to implement the promised reforms is largely bypassed, played down, or justified in the scholarship as a logical and inevitable response by an oppressed minority. Ronald Grigor Suny, for instance, claims that the Armenians' approach to violence was largely "conceived as self-defense against the rapacious extortions of Kurdish tribesmen."<sup>307</sup> This is of course partially true as the Kurdish feudal lords had increased their oppression of the Armenian peasants over the latter decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and especially after the creation of the Hamidiye regiments. However, as Justin McCarthy and Jeremy Salt have demonstrated, ever since the 1870s East Anatolia had been "the target of Ottoman reforms, of European pressure and intrigues and of revolutionary violence and finally the top of this pressure cooker seemed to be blowing off." The region's communities were provoked beyond endurance and, as a result of the collision of differing visions of reforms, they resorted to violence. Salt adds that it was of course an unequal struggle, "simply because there were far more Muslims than Christians, and one that the Armenian revolutionary movements, enlisting support where they could, could not hope to win unless the European powers intervened on their behalf. This had been the cornerstone of their strategy all along."<sup>308</sup> Armenian elites had grown disillusioned with the slow pace of reforms. They were also distrustful of the Porte's sincerity in implementing reforms. More importantly, the Armenian revolutionaries were exasperated by the great power

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<sup>307</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *"They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else": A History of the Armenian Genocide*, 2017, 142.

<sup>308</sup> Salt, *Imperialism*, 59.

rivalry over the Eastern Question. Thus, they turned to violence as a means to induce great power intervention.

Ronald Suny informs us that the Armenian revolutionaries deployed terror for various reasons: “to protect and defend, to revenge injustices, to inspire the victimized Armenian peasants to resist, to convince the sultan to implement reforms, and to pressure Europe to fulfill its promises.”<sup>309</sup> These categories represent a wide spectrum of action by Armenian revolutionaries that out of context appear to be positive and legitimate pursuits. To avoid sounding apologetic by recycling arguments prevalent in the Turkish historiographical literature that portrays the fate of the Armenians as a tragic consequence of wartime contingencies, I have sought to investigate the intertwined histories of the communities in the course of the long 19<sup>th</sup> century on both sides of the border. This is particularly important as much of the Armenian revolutionary activities and logistical preparations were conducted from Iranian territory. This, in turn, increased imperial frontier security concerns, leading Russia and the Ottoman empire to deploy military and ideological forces in the region with the object of winning over the loyalties of populations through their sectarian affiliations to the competing states.

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter on Ubeydullah and the earlier section of the present chapter, the Kurdish communities’ visions of imperial reforms increasingly assumed a sectarian character under the weight of an emerging interstate system that prioritized the national idea as a source of legitimacy by the great powers only for Christian communities while the Ottoman authorities sought to augment the sectarian affiliations of the Kurds to stave off Shi’i encroachments. The great powers, aided by missionaries, actively sought to intervene on behalf of the Christian communities of the

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<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 142.

Ottoman Empire and Iran as support for these groups aligned with their interests. However, they chose to ignore and actively suppress the expression of Kurdish communal identity, even when the Kurds deployed the same national idea in order to achieve their communal goals. Of course, as Michael Reynolds has elucidated, “the Great Powers, which were engaged in building vast colonial empires, applied the principle of the nation-state selectively and in service of their own state interests.”<sup>310</sup> Thus, even though Russian and British authorities, missionaries, and travelers did view Kurdish tribes through the prism of the national idea, the British and Russian colonial imperative of making the Ottoman-Iranian boundaries took priority as a clear borderline would facilitate “their trade and telegraphic communications, reaffirm their central roles in the politics of the Ottoman Empire and Iran, and define the limits of the negotiating states’ legal authority.”<sup>311</sup>

It was the convergence of the contingencies of the Eastern Question and the Great Game that unfolded on the Ottoman-Iranian frontiers. The British sought to preserve the integrity of the Ottoman Empire to maintain the European balance of power and to uphold Iran as a buffer against Russia’s advance towards India. On the other hand, Russia’s efforts to exploit the Eastern Question manifested in the form of aiding the Balkan Christians and making tentative promises to replicate the same in East Anatolia. This aggravated the Ottoman state’s security concerns in East Anatolia as its porous frontiers with a weaker Iranian state, dominated by Russia, only served to aggravate the rivalry over the region. The loyalty of the region’s populations, pulled in different directions by the multifaceted nature of reform visions on the colonial, imperial, and local

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<sup>310</sup> Michael Anthony Reynolds, “The Ottoman-Russian Struggle for Eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus, 1908–1918: Identity, Ideology and the Geopolitics of World Order” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2003), 89.

<sup>311</sup> Ateş, *The Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands*, 2013, 186.

levels, became more elusive as it was simultaneously more desired. The fact that the Sunni Kurds could and had on various occasions sought Russia's, Britain's, and Iran's aid and alliance exercised great pressure on the Porte to win their loyalties at any cost. And as the Kurds were tribally organized, investing in their sectarian identities seemed to be the surest way to securing their loyalty to the Ottoman state with which they shared their Sunni faith.

Such divergent communal orientations among Kurdish and Christian groups gradually posed a more serious danger to frontier imperial security as the Iranian government grew weaker, opening a space for the overlapping communities and rivaling empires to build a more secure foothold inside Iran. Earlier in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the potential danger posed by Russian imperial expansion was offset by British support for both Iran and the Ottoman Empire even as Russia also toed the same line in the hope of claiming the prize of Istanbul at a more opportune time. Thus, the Ottoman-Iranian boundary-making fitted well with the agenda of both colonial and imperial powers. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this was no longer possible. The frontier communities had become more assertive in adopting the very same national idea that had been promoted as the primary principle for claiming political sovereignty by the very same great powers invested in making the Iranian-Ottoman boundaries. As such, the overlapping populations of the northern Ottoman-Iranian borders became more receptive to varying ideologies, which gradually assumed a more salient sectarian character as violence became the means for achieving communal goals in the face of contradictory and overlapping colonial, imperial, and local visions.

In the context of imperial reforms, part of which was to demarcate the boundaries, state violence in the frontier zone increased as it was justified by both colonial and imperial administrators in the interest of modernization. Within the state-centered

modernization discourse of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Kurdish tribal resistance against expansion of state capacity into the tribal zone was portrayed as an irrational reaction by primordial groups inherently defiant of the logics of the modern world. In light of the prevalence of such discourses, it is little wonder that none of the international treaties extended any reforms to the Kurdish communities of Iran and the Ottoman empire. Informed by such biases in outlook, the great powers exerted pressure on behalf of *only* Christian groups, leaving the more numerous Kurdish communities with little alternative but to resist the sharp decline of their political power and social standing. Thus, the causes of increasing intercommunal conflict between Muslim Kurdish tribes and Christian groups of Ottoman East Anatolia and northwest Iran did not necessarily lie in the inherent predisposition of tribes to violence against modernization schemes or imperial manipulation by the Porte. That was certainly part of the challenge as tribes did resist control.

However, the sources of the problem lay rather in the very conception of the great power reform schemes that prioritized Christian communities' interests at the expense of other groups, prompting Ottomans and Iranians to do the same in order to win over Sunni and Shi'i communal loyalties. The Treaty of Berlin, which made the national idea the official and legitimate source of sovereignty, made no reference to the larger Kurdish population of East Anatolia save for demands for the implementation of measures to protect Armenians against 'depredations of Kurds and Circassians.' The fact that focus remained almost exclusively on the plight of Christian groups and on describing such desperate acts of digging out corpses in search of valuables by Kurdish irregulars during Russo-Ottoman wars as evidence testifying to Kurdish tribal savagery instead of extreme impoverishment goes a long way in revealing the inherent bias in the European colonial outlook.



Thus, if Armenian raids into Ottoman East Anatolia, which primarily targeted Kurds, could be interpreted by Ronald Suny as efforts at seeking justified national rights, precisely, using the same logic, it could be argued that Kurdish tribes used violence to defend and protect, to stave off both real and perceived threats posed by the Armenian revolutionaries, and to prevent their Christian rivals' political ascendancy through great power protection. However, it is not the aim of this study to delve into questions of justice and culpability but rather to strike a balance between the histories of the communities involved by telling a more nuanced story of all parties involved. Lord Warkworth's analysis of the Armenian atrocities in Van in 1898 reveals a great deal about the state of affairs among the Christian and Kurdish groups and the inherent bias that informed European public opinion and scholarship at the time:

Appalling as the massacres have been in almost every part of the six Armenian villagers, that of Van has suffered the most, because it is here that the Govt has conspicuously failed to exercise any real mastery over the Kurds, and that the revolutionary societies have been most energetic in the prosecution of their violent propaganda. Those who in England are loudest in their sympathy with the aspirations of a people 'rightly struggling to be free' can hardly have realised the atrocious methods of terrorism and blackmail by which a handful of desperadoes, as careful of their own safety as they are reckless of the lives of others, have too successfully coerced their unwilling compatriots into complicity with an utterly hopeless conspiracy. It has been proved beyond the possibility of refutation, it has been admitted by the authors themselves, that this agitation has been carried on by them not with any prospect of achieving their object by the means employed, but in the calculation that by provoking reprisals the European Powers would be compelled to interfere.<sup>312</sup>

The history of intercommunal strife in East Anatolia has been the focus of many studies, precisely because the Ottoman state was the focal point of the Eastern Question and thus little attention has been paid to the Iranian side of the frontier, where much of the Armenian revolutionaries' organizational capacity was orchestrated. During the 1890s,

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<sup>312</sup> Warkworth, *Notes from a Diary in Asiatic Turkey* by Lord Warkworth., 122.

the Iranian frontiers were embroiled in Kurdish-Armenian conflicts, and the Kurdish tribes of the Iranian districts of Kotur and Salmas were drawn into the fray. This spillover effect or rather active Ottoman policy to bind the Kurds to the state via sectarian links extended intercommunal animosities into Iranian territory. Here in Iran the considerations of the Eastern Question and the Great Game merged to create a set of unique conditions for the free expression of a sectarian culture as the lead-up period to the Constitutional Revolution provided space for popular expressions of varied visions of political and social organization. The impact of popular protests, which culminated in the Constitutional Revolution, has been studied amply. However, the process of national identity formation along the northwestern frontiers with the Ottoman Empire is yet to be examined. This region's ethno-religious diversity, by dint of its exposure to missionary rivalry and imperial frontier security competition between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, became the site of frequent episodes of extreme intercommunal and state violence in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Clashing communal visions and imperial frontier security anxieties underlay much of the violence.

The formation of the Hamidiye Light Cavalry in the 1890s did not ultimately fulfill its intended object of producing stability in the Ottoman domains. The Hamidiye militias' land-grabbing practices not only caused much violence and bloodshed in incessant intertribal warfare but would also further intensify intercommunal relations under the Young Turk regime as the new government would aspire to restore usurped lands by the Hamidiye chiefs to their original Kurdish and Armenian owners. The creation of these Kurdish regiments by the Ottoman state, however, had also the unintended consequence of reversing the atomization of the tribal structure of Kurdistan, allowing for new forms of identity and indigenous Kurdish representative bodies to re-emerge. The Hamidiye officers acquired immense power and prestige by creating pockets

of autonomy that resembled the authority of the Kurdish dynasts prior to the state penetration of the periphery. As Captain Dickson observed in 1908:

The Hamidieh movement has had a tremendous effect on these Kurds. Before they were formed into Hamidieh, with the exception of some very few tribes, they were wretched creatures, I am told, poor, ignorant, unarmed, with no power and in great fear of the government, which used to treat them like dirt. Then came the idea of making them into irregular cavalry, and that chiefs were made Beys, Pashas, and Colonels etc. decorated by the Sultan, given uniforms, guns, pay and many privileges, among the biggest being their immunity from punishment by the civil government, and more or less a free license to rob and pillage the Christian villages. Thus the Kurds see their chiefs promoted and decorated and this in most cases has only served to increase the Kurds opinion of his chief and himself at the expense of the government.<sup>313</sup>

Janet Klein' study of the Hamidiye Light Cavalry also suggests that the Hamidiye chiefs, however reviled they may have been, were nevertheless instrumental as liaisons between the Ottoman government and the Kurdish communities. Under the Young Turk regime, when fervent efforts were launched to resolve the Agrarian Question (restoration of usurped Armenian lands to their original owners) between 1908-1910, powerful Hamidiye chiefs engaged in various effort bargains with the new regime and used different tactics to stymie the new regime's attempts at dispossessing them. Among many steps they took, the Hamidiye chiefs, for instance, created provincial cultural and political clubs as channels to preserve their privileges after 1908.<sup>314</sup> It can also be argued that the Hamidiye officers helped to frame the conflict with the Armenian revolutionaries in a sectarian idiom, as they, along with their Ottoman patrons, envisioned and promulgated their opposition to the Armenian revolutionaries as a *jihad* against *gavurs* [infidels].

However, the Kurdish-Armenian conflict in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century could not be simply reduced to the exploitation of Kurds by the Ottoman state to deploy raw violence

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<sup>313</sup> Dickson to O'Connor, Van, no. 7, March 15, 1908, (FO 195/2283).

<sup>314</sup> Klein, *The Margins of Empire*.

against perceived threats to the state. The Hamidiye institution also constituted an Ottoman reform scheme to safeguard its vulnerable frontiers by securing the loyalties of its more numerous Sunni subjects through stressing their religious bonds with the state. Such efforts by the Ottoman state were embraced by the Kurdish elites as they helped to restore some of the privileges that their dynastic predecessors had enjoyed prior to the inauguration of the *tanzimat* era. In this sense, the great powers' conception and enforcement of an exclusively Christian-focused reform vision was offset by the Ottoman state by reform schemes in favor of its Muslim subjects, a process that wreaked havoc with intercommunal dynamics balancing Kurdish-Christian relations.

The European-mandated reforms had transformed religion into a site of contestation between the Ottoman state, the colonial powers, and the local communities. Moreover, the national idea, that was promulgated at the Congress of Berlin, was not distinctly separate from Christian identity. In so far as Ottoman East Anatolia was concerned, only the Christian groups' national aspirations were considered legitimate precisely because they were Christian and had the sympathy of the European and American public and the foreign missionaries who framed the conflict in a sectarian discourse. The Ottoman Empire, viewed as an Islamic state with Christian minorities, was forced to provide Armenians with a special status, inadvertently pitting the majority Muslim communities against them. In this light, the Hamidiye was a Muslim replica of the great power support for the entrenchment of the national idea among the Armenians, even though Kurdish ethnicity was not acknowledged or promoted by the Ottoman state. But in the process of the Porte's contestation with the European powers over the status of the Armenian communities and with Iran over frontier delimitation there emerged a Kurdish community with new boundaries: a community constructed within a sectarian framework. The Kurds had become the special subjects of the sultan (Abdülhamid II was

referred to as *Bave Kurdan*, father of the Kurds, by the Hamidiye chiefs) specifically in opposition to the great powers' adoption of the Armenians as special subjects of the European-led reforms.

#### **THE SHIKAK TRIBES AND THE ARMENIAN REVOLUTIONARIES:**

The protracted pervasive violence of the 1890s between Armenian militias and the Ottoman state troops and the Hamidiye Light Cavalry Corps in Ottoman East Anatolia and northwest Iran was qualitatively different and provided the necessary conditions for construction of boundaries of difference on a sectarian and ultimately ethnonational basis. The violence of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as İpek Yosmaoğlu has argued, was systemic and pervasive, “and pitted one community against another, whether the members of those communities desired to be active participants in this struggle or not.”<sup>315</sup> In other words, stemming from clashing imperial and communal visions over claims to territorial sovereignty and the rights and status of subjects, violence served as “a prerequisite to the politicization of communal difference.”<sup>316</sup>

As argued earlier in the chapter, both the Iranian and Ottoman states became interlocked in a struggle involving questions of state sovereignty over imperial subjects astride their shared frontiers. Both the Shi'i Iranian state, the Sunni Ottoman empire, and a Christian tsarist Russia engaged in politics of subjecthood in order to advance their claims to territorial sovereignty through the sectarian policy of offering protection to religious communities. The ramifications of this policy were disastrous on the local level as Armenian and Kurdish paramilitary groups conducted pursuits at cross-purposes. The Armenians deployed violence in order to bring ethno-nationalist consciousness to East

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<sup>315</sup> İpek Yosmaoğlu, *Blood Ties: Religion, Violence, and the Politics of Nationhood in Ottoman Macedonia, 1878-1908*, 2014, 1.

<sup>316</sup> Yosmaoğlu, 217.

Anatolia's Armenian peasants. In reaction, the Hamidian regime created armed militia regiments from among its Sunni Kurdish subjects to consolidate entrenchment of its ideological state apparatus in the borderlands. The Kurdish tribes enrolled in the Hamidiye to restore their waning power through state backing. The result was pervasive intercommunal violence through which a sectarian and ultimately ethno-nationalist boundary emerged between the Sunni Kurdish and Christian Armenian communities on both sides of the northern Ottoman-Iranian borderlands.

The Hamidiye regiments' state-sponsored prerogatives offered attractive incentives to the Sunni Kurds of Iran, especially in light of their estrangement from Iran following their violent suppression by the Shi'i tribal bands and state troops in 1880-81, which were one and the same. This section will discuss the role played by the Iranian Kurdish *ashiret* of Shikak in the 1890s intercommunal violence as part of imperial frontier security concerns, which led to the extension of Ottoman imperial power into Iranian territory. The investigation reveals that the Ottomans sought to secure the porous frontier around Salmas by extending the Hamidiye institution to Iranian Kurds. This policy, which developed with the aim of checking Armenian raids and binding the Kurds to the sultan, provided the blueprint for the Porte's later occupation of the northern disputed frontiers.

Among the Iranian tribes that played a greater role in the conflict, the Shikaks stood out. This loosely organized tribal confederation occupied a large swath of territory along the northern strip of the Ottoman-Iranian frontier, stretching from Baradost and Somai to Chahriq and Kotur. On the Ottoman side of the frontier, the Shikaks were distributed over the kazas of Hamidiye, Ablbakh, and Gawar. The Iranian districts of Salmas and Khoi, located in the vicinity of the Shikak territory, constituted the centers of Armenian revolutionary committees. Certain villages such as Ula and Hafdevan in

Salmas district served as bases of operations and supply lines for militant groups, who launched expeditions against Ottoman Hamidiye chiefs and state officials across the border in Van.

Thus, it was no coincidence that the Iranian Shikak tribal factions, such as those centered at Chahriq under the leadership of Mohammad Agha [alias Mami Agha], were more heavily involved in the conflict. The Shikaks had merged into a formidable tribal confederation under the leadership of Ali Khan Shikak in the late 1870s on both sides of the frontier. However, the murder of a notable chief had caused a schism, resulting in the secession of the Ottoman Shikak section of Merziki. Consequently, the murdered chief's son, Sheref Bey of Bashkale, had developed a fierce feud with the Iranian Shikaks of Chahriq.<sup>317</sup>

Ali Khan Shikak had first come to the notice of the British during the 1877-78 Russo-Ottoman war and later in the course of Sheikh Ubeydullah's campaigns in 1880-81. The majority of the Shikak tribesmen had refused to join the sheikh's army in unison. Ubeydullah, however, had sent an army under his son, Seyyid Abdulkadir, in early 1880, forcing Ali Khan to pledge allegiance and to send his son, Mohammad [alias Mami] Agha as guarantee to the sheikh's camp. The Shikaks' alliance had, nevertheless, been a flimsy one that had broken down at the outset of Ubeydullah's campaigns in Iran. In late 1880, as noted above, the power of the Shikaks had been broken by the Iranian state's troops with Ali Khan tendering his submission in 1881.

By the 1890s, as the Armenian revolutionary activities were on the rise across Ottoman East Anatolia, the Shikak tribal confederation was re-emerging as a potent force on the northern frontiers under Ali Khan's son and successor, Mohammad Agha. The

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<sup>317</sup> Devey to Graves, Van, July 2, 1894, *Turkey no. 6 (1896)*, 126-128.

sultan had started his project of creating the Hamidiye in 1891 and the idea floated around that if the Hamidiye regiments proved successful in establishing order in East Anatolia, the Iranian government would also “introduce a similar military system among the Kurds on the Persian side of the frontier.”<sup>318</sup> The existence of unrestrained Kurdish tribes, sometimes offshoots of the same tribal confederation on the Iranian side of the frontier, was deemed to be a factor that could undermine the success of the Ottoman Hamidiye project.<sup>319</sup> Meanwhile, Mushir Zeki Pasha, the Marshal of the IVth Army and the architect of the Hamidiye regiments, was touring the country of Van, ceremoniously distributing uniforms and colors to assembled chiefs at the head of their tribesmen in Van.<sup>320</sup>

In May 1893, rumors and reports of a gruesome crime against Armenian peasants in a village in the vicinity of the Varak monastery (which was known to be a stop for revolutionists) struck fear among the population of Van. Men had been killed and their bodies mutilated. On the same day, a certain Kilijji Hagob was shot at on the streets of Van by revolutionists on account of his collaboration with the Ottoman police.<sup>321</sup> The incident caused alarm and prompted the police to conduct frequent house searches for seditious material and weaponry. The European press began running exaggerated reports of the incidents in Van and other places in Ottoman East Anatolia. For instance, when upwards of one hundred villagers from the vicinity of the Varak monastery formed a procession and passed through the city of Van with naked corpses showing jagged wounds on their bodies on ox carts, the *vali* tried to appease them and send them away by offering them to cover their funeral expenses while making promises to investigate the

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<sup>318</sup> Fitzmaurice to Hampson, Van, May 31, 1892, *Turkey no. 3 (1896)*, 29.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>320</sup> Fitzmaurice to Hampson, Van, June 11, 1892, *Turkey no. 3 (1896)*, 34.

<sup>321</sup> Devey to Graves, Van, May 30, 1893, *Turkey. No.3 (1896)*, 143.



murders. What appeared in *The Daily News* was, however, the story of unprovoked and unjust government oppression and mistreatment of the victims' families.<sup>322</sup> Despite the British consuls' frequent denials of such rumors, sensational reports of hundreds of Armenian political prisoners languishing in Turkish jails on mere suspicions continued to make headlines in the European press. The European public was fed with such propaganda, emboldening Armenian revolutionists to make an attempt on the life of Bahri Pasha, the new *vali* of Van.<sup>323</sup> Meanwhile, the *vali*'s inaction in bringing justice to the murdered Armenians of Varak monastery rankled with Armenian peasants, making them easy targets for recruitment by revolutionists. Similar incidents, caused by Armenian revolutionists and Hamidiye depredations, increased the scale of violence elsewhere in Ottoman East Anatolia. By 1893, two years into the inauguration of the Hamidiye regiments, Armenian forays were on the rise, leading to the creation of a general state of insecurity along the northern stretch of the Ottoman-Iranian frontiers.

In 1894, the British vice-consul of Van G. P. Devey made a tour of the Hakkari *sanjak*, the most rugged mountainous subdivision of Van. His observations indicated that pretty much the old feudal system of the era of the lords of the marches continued uninterrupted with Kurdish, Nestorian, and Yezidi chiefs merely paying annual tributes to the state. Devey reported that disturbances from across the border had been more in evidence of late. In 1893, Mohammad Agha, the chief of the Chahriq Shikak faction, had conducted several forays into the Ottoman territory to overawe his rival Shikak chief Sheref Bey with whom his father's blood feud continued. In 1894, Mohammad Agha found the right opportunity to realize his ambition through official channels. In competition with Sheref Bey and to escape punishment by Iranian authorities for his

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<sup>322</sup> Devey to Graves, Van, October 3, 1893, *Turkey. No.3 (1896)*, 196.

<sup>323</sup> Graves to Ford, Erzeroum, November 10, 1893, *Turkey. No.3 (1896)*, 221.

recent raids, Mohammad Agha petitioned the *vali* of Van to allow him to register two regiments in the Hamidiye Light Cavalry Corps. His proposal was accepted and he was duly awarded with the rank and title of Pasha in return for his pledge of allegiance to the sultan. As a Lieutenant-Colonel of the Hamidiye Light Cavalry, the Iranian Shikak chief was also granted control of the evacuated Armenian lands in the Ottoman kaza of Mahmudi in Hakkari where he was encouraged to settle in the village of Arrag.<sup>324</sup> Devey doubted that his enlistment would prove effective, stating:

Whether the outcome of this affair will prove profitable or not is extremely doubtful. Possibly the zeal of the Persian authorities for Mami's capture will flag, and he will then certainly return with his followers to his adopted land, where he has relatives and valuable possessions. Or he may revert to his habitual courses of robbery and violence, and then when in trouble with the Turkish authorities try to place himself under Persian protection as a victim of Turkish oppression and persecution.<sup>325</sup>

The Iranian Chahriq Shikaks crossed into Ottoman territory and occupied the village of Arrag in the kaza of Albakh with its administrative capital at Bashkale. The Iranian Pasha established his headquarters at the Armenian-Kurdish village of Arrag, which was reported to have been one of the most prosperous in the kaza. Under government protection, Mami Pasha and his tribesmen began to extort the inhabitants of the outlying villages of their livelihoods as they quartered themselves at their expense. Rape and terror became the order of the day under Mami, who swaggered down Arrag, showing off his newly tailored Hamidiye uniform and colored badge. His Shikak followers also took full advantage of the Ottoman government's authorization to occupy the land property of those Armenians who crossed the frontier on any business. Thus, in the 1890s, under the

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<sup>324</sup> Devey to Graves, Van, no. 150, July 2, 1894, *Turkey. No.6 (1896)*, 127. Later in September in different report, the new vice-consul of Van, Hallward, mentioned that Mami Pasha had made his petition through the mediation of Sheikh Hamid Pasha, a notable of a village near Bashkale and settled about 100 of his followers in the village of Arrag. See Hallward to Graves, Van, September 10, 1894, *Turkey No.6 (1896)*, 141.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

auspicious of the Ottoman state, not only the Shikak tribes of Salmas were drawn into the conflict, they also helped to advance the unacknowledged Ottoman policy of displacing Armenian villagers and repopulating them with Kurdish tribesmen.<sup>326</sup> However, just as the vice-consul of Van had predicted, as soon as Mami Pasha was asked to relocate to Norduz, a district located a little farther away from the frontier, the chief retreated back into Iran in order to reconcile with the Iranian authorities of Azerbaijan and reclaim his possessions at Chahriq.<sup>327</sup>

The hostilities of the Kurdish tribes, especially those of the Shikaks', did not remain confined to the Armenian communities alone. Shortly after reverends William H. Browne and Arthur J. Maclean of the Archbishop of Canterbury Mission to the Assyrian Christians had established themselves among the Nestorians of Urmia and Hakkari in 1886, reports circulated that the Kurdish tribes of Hakkari had collected with the aim of massacring the Christian *ashirets* of Tiyyari and Tkuma. The threat was defused through the joint efforts of the British consuls of Van and Tabriz and British ambassadors, who exercised concerted pressure on the Porte on behalf of the Nestorians.<sup>328</sup> American missionary, Fredrick G. Coan, laid the blame on the connivance of Ottoman regular troops with the Kurds to destroy the Nestorians. He arrived at this opinion as all telegraphic communication had been cut off to disrupt missionary communication while the Ottoman authorities purportedly sought to establish the Nestorians as the real culprits in the recent disturbances.<sup>329</sup>

The extraordinary attention the Nestorians had suddenly come to receive from the great powers was alarming to the Ottomans. The Anglican missionary, William Browne,

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<sup>326</sup> Hallward to Graves, Van, September 10, 1894, Inclosure 2 in No. 172, *Turkey No.6 (1896)*, p.141-42.

<sup>327</sup> Hallward to Graves, Van, January 7, 1895, *Turkey No.6 (1896)*, 214.

<sup>328</sup> Abbott to Marquis of Salisbury, Tabreez, September 8, 1888, *Turkey. No. 1 (1888)*, 23.

<sup>329</sup> Coan to Shedd, Kochanes, August 23, 1888, *Turkey. No. 1 (1888)*, 27-28.

took up residence with Mar Shimun at Kochanes in 1887, prompting the *vali* of Van to expressly request his expelling. The Pasha sought to dislodge the English missionary and assert control over the semi-autonomous Nestorians by inciting Hakkari's Kurdish tribes against them.<sup>330</sup> Certain British officials were sympathetic to Ottoman protestations. Colonel Bell, for instance, echoed the concerns raised by Major Trotter of Erzurum about the exaggerated rumors, stating that "My sympathy is rather with the Governors than the governed, for in this "kingdom within a kingdom" a condition of things exists scarcely to be tolerated in any even semi-civilized country, resulting in all power being in the hands of the lawless minority."<sup>331</sup> This view resonated with Rusetm Pasha, the emissary of the Porte in London, who expressed his government's dissatisfaction with the establishment of the Anglican missionaries in the area, holding them accountable for giving rise to false rumors that the Nestorians were in danger of annihilation.

The reports of George P. Devey, the British vice-consul at Van, corroborate the missionary accounts about the reasons behind the disturbances of the 1887-88. The troubles began as usual with sheep-lifting by the Kurds and a retaliatory rustling by their Nestorian neighbors. Through representations by missionaries, including Coan and Browne, the Nestorians received a relief force from the Ottoman government, which was followed by banishing the Kurdish chief of the Hartushi tribe, Sheikh Nuri. Sheikh Nuri, assisted by Tatar Khan Bey, who was also the *mudir* of a number of the villages in Lower Tiyyari, started gathering Kurdish tribes to launch an attack against the Nestorian Christians in the name of Islam. The Kurdish force's threat was neutralized when the *vali* of Mosul was removed through British pressure, leading to the evaporation of the

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<sup>330</sup> Trotter to White, Constantinople, September 26, 1888, *Turkey. No. 1 (1888)*, 31-32.

<sup>331</sup> Memorandum of Colonel Bell on Recent Events, etc., in Hakkari, January 14, 1889. No.55, *Turkey. No. 1 (1888)*, 47.

presumed government support for the Kurdish campaign. Upon the arrival of the *vali* of Van, the Kurds dispersed after a small engagement with the regular *zaptiehs*.

This incident clearly demonstrates how inter-tribal dynamics became an international issue as missionaries turned into channels of great power intervention in the mountains in the name of defending Christians. As Selim Deringil has argued:

In a historical conjuncture of almost continuous tension and upheaval, half-understood nationalist slogans, and abundant rumour presaging this or that impending disaster, the occurrence of something as minor as the conversion of an obscure peasant could achieve international dimensions.<sup>332</sup>

Moreover, the missionaries' reporting of the incidents in the form of sectarian confrontations, regardless of their veracity, contributed to the framing of the conflict in this light. In other words, even if the conflict was not sectarian, the fact that the missionaries made it look like it was, had its own repercussions as Ottoman and Iranian officials and tribal notables lost their positions of power and influence at the request of foreign authorities who made representations on behalf of local Ottoman Christian subjects. Also the Muslim population, including the Ottoman and Iranian officials and the locals, became aware of such fears and exploited these concerns to their best advantage. Sheikh Nuri may or may not have framed the conflict in sectarian terms, but that's what the missionaries reported to the consuls and the European and American press, creating the atmosphere that Islam and Christianity were in a constant clash. Sheikh Nuri may have also been aware that the surest means to achieving his ends was through instrumentalization of religion, the course that seemed to be adopted by all sides, especially the Europeans and their beneficiaries. In fact, as noted above, the Armenian revolutionaries intended to provoke precisely such a 'fanatical Muslim backlash' in order to induce great power support because that was how the Europeans perceived the

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<sup>332</sup> Deringil, *Conversion and Apostasy in the Late Ottoman Empire*, 5.

conflicts in the Ottoman domains and this is how public opinion had been aroused in favor of great power support for the Bulgarians. Religion had become the primary forum for staking political claims and that is exactly what this study means by sectarianism in practice and as a discourse. Every party involved in the conflicts, including the Kurds, the Armenians and Nestorians, and their great power and missionary patrons and the Ottoman officials deployed religion to justify, to explain, to provoke, and to settle conflict.

The Nestorians were not pleased with the prospect of the *vali* coming into their territories with regular troops, thus Mar Shimun fulfilled his function as a government agent in collecting the demanded tribute and paid off the outstanding arrears. However, the status quo remained, with Mar Shimun's flock left to continue in their semi-independent status.<sup>333</sup> Devey further recommended that as a deterrent against future threats against the Nestorian country, the new *vali* of Mosul, Rashid Pasha, who had replaced Ali Kamil Pasha at Britain's request, should be urged to settle the Kurdish *ashirets* of Herki, Hartushi, and Miran as these tribes' annual migration routes passed through Hakkari. This recommendation remained a promise to be fulfilled, however, as the Porte did not see any advantage in alienating the Kurds when Armenian raids continued unabated.

Throughout the 1890s, following the formation of the Hamidiye regiments, the Ottoman authorities' policy seemed to have evolved into one of allowing Kurds to "stamp out or drive out the Christian elements as far as possible in this province [Van], and replace it by Kurds."<sup>334</sup> As Janet Klein has suggested, although the government may

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<sup>333</sup> Devey to Chermiside, Van, December 24, 1888, *Turkey. no. 1 (1888)*, 50.

<sup>334</sup> Vice-Consul Hallward to Graves, Van, September 10, 1894, Inclosure 3 in no. 172, *Turkey No.6 (1896)*, 143.

not have initiated “the process whereby large tracts of land were confiscated by Kurdish chiefs who were most often affiliated with the Hamidiye cavalry, it did support it in order to advance its own projects.”<sup>335</sup> Elaborating on the vice-consul of Van’s assessment of the emerging Ottoman policy along the Ottoman-Iranian frontiers, Robert W. Graves, the consul of Erzurum noted that such a policy was pervasive in Ottoman Kurdistan.

Besides the region in Van dealt with by Mr. Hallward, these conditions are to be met with in the very districts where the strength of the Armenian country population is still to be found; in the Moush Sandjak of Bitlis, the south-eastern cazas [sub-districts] of Erzeroum Sandjak, and the Sandjak of Bayazid, though in the last-named, war, famine, and misgovernment have largely eliminated the Armenian element.<sup>336</sup>

Following the general loss of order in the East Anatolian provinces of the empire, in September 1895, the sultan was to be presented with a petition by the Armenian leadership in Istanbul to renew his commitment to the enforcement of the promised reforms, the termination of the Kurdish depredations, and the appointment of a European governor-general for the six *vilayets*.<sup>337</sup> On October 1, 1895, a large number of Armenians took to the streets of Istanbul in protest to the lukewarm responses from the sultan. During the *Bab-i Ali* rally, which was organized by the Hnchakian Party, many of the demonstrators were already armed as violence was expected or intended. Christopher Walker has provided the details:

*En route* for the Porte the demonstrators were stopped by the police, under the control on this occasion of an allegedly able major, Server Bey. He first urged them to halt; when they refused and insisted on proceeding, he shouted 'Yasak!' – 'It's forbidden!' He then ordered his men to use the butt ends of their rifles to push the crowd back. An Armenian student then asked him on what authority he barred their way; they were, after all, just presenting a petition to the Sublime Porte. Server Bey had no time for this: he insulted him ('Damned infidel!') and struck

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<sup>335</sup> Klein, *The Margins of Empire*, 130.

<sup>336</sup> Graves to P. Currie, Erzeroum, September 18, 1894, Inclosure 1 in no. 172, *Turkey No. 6 (1896)*, 140.

<sup>337</sup> Walker, *Armenia*, 152–55.

him with his sword. The Armenian drew out a hidden revolver, and blew Server's brains out.<sup>338</sup>

The incident triggered a backlash from the Muslim population who went on a rampage killing of several thousand Armenians. The outbreak of violence against the Armenians in the capital quickly spread to Anatolia. Across the panic-ridden frontier zone exaggerated rumors of an impending Armenian revolt against Muslims shot up fears. The eruption of conflict in Bitlis between Muslims and Armenians enshrouded the city of Van in an atmosphere of imminent disaster. Meanwhile, in the countryside Kurdish tribal raids spiked, as armed tribesmen overawed a largely agricultural population with little means of defense.<sup>339</sup> In November of 1895, the vice-consul of Van, Cecil M. Hallward, reported that most of the villages of the Adiljavaz and Arjish had been completely plundered by the Hamidiye chiefs of the Hayderanli tribe and refugee villagers had taken shelter with their coreligionists in the villages closer to Lake Van.<sup>340</sup>

The Armenian revolutionaries' activities were not only ineffective in checking the Kurdish depredations, but, on the contrary, they provided justified excuses to the Hamidiye chiefs to conduct further retaliatory raids that led to more land and property seizures. Thus, for instance, when a band of around fifty Armenian revolutionaries crossed the Iranian frontier, first, the Hamidiye regiments in Serai blocked their progress. Then, after a series of small skirmishes, which led to the murder and dispersal of the guerillas, the Hamidiye chiefs authorized the complete plunder and occupation of the villages in the Serai district.<sup>341</sup> Similarly, in July 1896, a regiment of Armenian revolutionaries, 800 strong, who had sought to reach Van and to take control of the town were frustrated in their attempt by Ottoman regular troops and the Hamidiye forces. On

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<sup>338</sup> Walker, 144.

<sup>339</sup> Hallward to Cumberbatch, Van, October 30, 1895, *Turkey no. 2 (1896)*, 148-49.

<sup>340</sup> Hallward to Cumberbatch, Van, November 6, 1895, *Turkey no. 2 (1896)*, 196.

<sup>341</sup> Hallward to Cumberbatch, Van, November 13, 1895, *Turkey no. 2 (1896)*, 212-13.



their escape across the frontier into Iran, the vanguard of the revolutionary band was ambushed by a section of the Iranian Shikak tribes under Taymur Agha and was slaughtered. The remaining Armenian guerillas were surrounded in the Varak monastery in the kaza of Albakh in Hakkari. The Shikak cavalry under Mohammad Pasha, along with another Hamidiye regiment centered at Bashkale, engaged them in battle. Few of the revolutionaries escaped with their lives. Throughout the remainder of 1896, the frontier region inside Iran remained in a state of agitation as the Shikak tribesmen threatened to assault the village of Haftdevan, which had become the center of Armenian revolutionary committees.<sup>342</sup>

Further south in Nawchia, another massacre alarmed the English and the American missionaries as, on this occasion, the Nestorian Christian communities became the target of violence. A party of fourteen Nestorians consisting of Bishop Mar Goriel of Urmia, his nephew, three priests from Tergawar, two deacons, and a servant of Mar Shimun and several attendants were massacred and their mutilated bodies were dumped on the Iranian side of the frontier. The missionaries and Iranian authorities suspected Sheikh Siddiq, Ubeydullah's younger son, of having committed the crime.<sup>343</sup> It is possible that the sheikh might have intended to exploit the widespread chaos and confusion to eliminate an energetic Nestorian bishop, who had spearheaded the efforts leading to the establishment of the Anglican mission in the mountains of Hakkari. Suspicion of the sheikh's ill intentions appears to be plausible as Sheikh Siddiq's depredations had increasingly come under the British and Ottoman officials' scrutiny following Browne's arrival at the seat of the patriarch in Kochanes. The American

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<sup>342</sup> Wood to Durand, Tabreez, July 23, 1896, *Turkey. No. 3 (1897)*, 1 and 2.

<sup>343</sup> *Gozidah- i Asnad-i Siyasi-i Iran va Usmani, Dawrah-i Qajariyeh* (Tehran: Daftar-i Mutala'at-i Siyasi va Bayn al-Milali, 1990-1996), vol. 4, 462-63.

missionary, Coan, noted that “There are rumors of a worst massacre in Van. As proof of this, early in the week the Kurds who are Persian subjects were summoned to the aid of those at Van and sent to the Governor of Khoi asking permission to join the Kurds of Van in wiping out the Armenians as “Jahat” or religious war had been proclaimed.”<sup>344</sup> It was in this atmosphere of heightened sectarian suspicions and animosities that the massacre of the Nestorian party took place. The Ottoman investigative commission, formed and dispatched through British pressure on the Porte, expectedly found no evidence linking the crime to the sheikh. The unacknowledged Ottoman policy of displacing Christians proved effective in condoning Kurdish violence, which was perceived to counter the greater Armenian revolutionary menace.

At the beginning of the fall season of 1896, the Shikak Kurds extended their depredations into the Nestorian territories as well, stripping several villages of their cattle and furnishings. Upon the looting of the villages of Tal, Bishu, and Paji, the Nestorian Matran, the highest ecclesiastical authority in the Church of the East after the patriarch, fled to Kochanes to take refuge with Mar Shimun and Mr. Browne.<sup>345</sup> The Matran, who had fled to Kochanes to evade Sheikh Siddiq’s machinations, was initially refused permission to move across the frontier into Iran. The Ottoman authorities of Hakkari claimed that his departure would induce the Nestorian refugees, who were stranded on the Iranian side of the frontier, to remain there permanently.<sup>346</sup> The general policy of displacing local Christians, however, belies such official claims. The Ottomans may have wanted to keep the Nestorian refugees in a vulnerable state without their spiritual and temporal head.

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<sup>344</sup> Rev. Coan to Wood, Tabriz, July 6, 1896, (FO 248/633).

<sup>345</sup> Wood to Durand, Tabreez, November 9, 1896, (FO 248/633).

<sup>346</sup> Williams to Currie, Van, February 27, 1897, Inclosure in No.112 Turkey no. 1 (1898), p.109.

In the late 1890s, following the Armenian massacres (1894-96), a degree of relative tranquility was restored as the Hamidiye officers turned to the more mundane affairs involving management of their newly acquired estates on the Ottoman side of the frontiers. This period of relative calm that followed the reduction of Armenian and Hamidiye raids translated into a period of fierce intertribal rivalry on the Iranian side of the frontier as the Iranian Shikak chiefs were no longer highly prized by the Ottoman state for their services against the Armenian *fedayis*. Consequently, the Iranian Shikaks' constant feuds with their rival Ottoman Shikak counterparts were seen as a destabilizing factor on the frontiers and the Porte, in line with the renewed policy of settling its mobile populations, stepped up its efforts to sedentarize the Iranian Shikaks.

The Shikak tribes under Mohammad Pasha and Jaffar Agha had switched alliances from one side to another in the 1890s, which had been irksome to the Porte but tolerated in light of the larger threat posed by the Armenian revolutionaries. According to an Ottoman report, when Mohammad Agha of Avdoi Shikaks was driven out of Iran in 1891, he gave *dikhalet* to the Ottoman *vali* of Van, Bahri Bey, who enlisted him in the Hamidiye as a *miralay* (colonel) with the title of Pasha and made temporary arrangements for his settlement in the Albakh district of Hakkari. However, since the Ottoman government's ultimate objective in enlisting the Hamidiye chiefs was resettlement of nomadic tribes of the frontier, Mohammad Pasha quickly returned to his old possessions at Chahriq in Iran in 1895 to avoid settlement under Ottoman sovereignty. His return was nevertheless short. He was driven out again by the Iranian authorities, upon which he sought refuge back in Hakkari. The Ottoman *vali* welcomed him again but gave him strict orders to settle with his family, including Jaffar Agha, who was also allotted a salary. Such persistent efforts at the settlement of the Iranian Shikaks

within the Ottoman domains reflected the larger imperial policy of encouraging Kurdish tribes to settle in the villages that had been vacated by the Armenians and Nestorians.<sup>347</sup>

In the 1890s, the frontier stretch between Bashkale, Kotur, and Salmas had turned into an Ottoman district as the Hamidiye chiefs were allowed to make cross-border raids, presumably in hot pursuit of the Armenian *fedayis* (revolutionists). Thus, Mohammad Pasha's and Jaffar Agha's blood enemy, Sheref Bey, a Hamidiye chief of the Bashkale Shikaks, could enter Iran and make retaliatory raids deep into Iranian territory to hunt down fugitive Armenian *fedayis*. In 1898, the British consul at Tabriz, reported that the Kurdish-Armenian conflict, which had somewhat subsided in the Ottoman domains, continued to disturb the frontier district of Salmas and Khoi. The frictions continued as bands of Armenian *fedayis*, established in villages across Salmas, made expeditions against Kurdish chiefs with the object of rekindling European attention that was shifting away to the Ottoman-Greek war of 1897.

The Armenian Revolutionary Committee in London requested the *fedayis* in Salmas to make a concerted attack on the Kurds in the Ottoman frontier. Sheref Bey was chosen as their primary target as he had taken a prominent part in the intercommunal atrocities. The British ambassador to Tehran alerted the Iranian authorities to their movements, urging them to maintain order on the frontier.<sup>348</sup> Soon an Armenian band of some 460 (the number was initially reported to have been some 2,000), accompanied by uniformed Russian or Armenian and Iranian officers (as claimed by the *vali* of Van), ambushed Sheref Bey's camp and brutally massacred some one hundred fifty members of his tribe, women and children included.<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>347</sup> BBA, DH.TMIK.M 47/49 1315.8.20/January 24, 1897.

<sup>348</sup> Hardinge to Salisbury, Gulhek, August 8, 1897, Turkey. No. 1, (1898), 237.

<sup>349</sup> Elliot to Currie, Van, August 11, 1897, Turkey. No. 1, (1898), 276. According to an Ottoman report, the atrocities of Armenians against Sheref Bey's tribe were very excessive. "They put out of the eyes of the

Meanwhile, the Iranian authorities sent a punitive expedition against the Iranian Shikak Kurds for having killed a body of government troops. A large number of Armenian revolutionists and refugees also took part in the government expedition.<sup>350</sup> The Ottoman state troops and a regiment of the Hamidiye also assembled in Bashkale.<sup>351</sup> This show of Ottoman force resulted in the retreat of the 1,800 strong Armenian revolutionists across the border into Iran without any notable opposition from the Iranian government. Iran's inaction was probably due to its military incapacity. This perceived Iranian connivance caused fierce protestations from the Porte, followed by further reinforcement of troops in Bashkale.<sup>352</sup> The Porte also immediately demanded punishment of the offenders, and asked for indemnities for the families of the victims, prosecution of responsible Iranian civil and military authorities, guarantees against any such future occurrences, and a formal apology to the Ottoman government. Failure to meet its demands, the Porte warned, could result in disruption of cordial ties between the two countries and possible coercive measures. In response, through British mediation, Iranian foreign minister issued stringent orders for the arrest, disarmament, and surrender of the Armenian revolutionists to Ottoman authorities, while warning the British and Russian governments that the Iranian government could not be held accountable for any injuries or fatalities that may be sustained by their subjects among the revolutionists.<sup>353</sup>

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men and cut off the ears and breasts of the women. Among their victims were 116 women and children and 47 wounded. Although, thanks to the action of the Imperial authorities, the marauders have been dispersed and have recrossed the frontier, it is, nevertheless, possible that, encouraged by the impunity which they enjoy in Persia, they may try to repeat their aggressions." See translation of the Ottoman report in inclosure 2 in No. 321 from Currie to Salisbury, Constantinople, August 16, 1897, Turkey. No. 1, (1898), 260-262.

<sup>350</sup> Hardinge to Salisbury, Gulhek, August 11, 1897, Turkey. No. 1, (1898), 249.

<sup>351</sup> Currie to Salisbury, Constantinople, August 12, 1897, Turkey. No. 1, (1898), 255.

<sup>352</sup> Currie to Salisbury, Constantinople, August 13, 1897, Turkey. No. 1, (1898), 256.

<sup>353</sup> Hardinge to Salisbury, Gulhek, August 17, 1897, Turkey. No. 1, (1898), 259. See also the Kaguzari of Azerbaijan's letter to the British General Consul, dated Shavval 1, 1315/February 23, 1898 (FO 248/675).

Meanwhile, Armenian terrorists were reported to have thrown a bomb in front of Galata Serai and one at the Ottoman Ministry of Foreign Affairs, causing considerable damage. The Ottoman public opinion was fiercely anti-Armenian and the Hamidiye Kurds purportedly awaited a signal from the Ottoman authorities to cross the frontier into Iran to raid the Armenian strongholds in Salmas.<sup>354</sup> However, shortly after, evidence emerged of Armenian revolutionists dispersal and partial withdrawal across the border into the Russian Caucasus. A number of the fugitives were intercepted in Tabriz and detained by Iranian troops.<sup>355</sup> Nevertheless, sporadic reports on the free movements of Armenians in Ottoman territory and the escape of the detainees arrived in Tehran and Istanbul.

On August 25, 1897, Iranian minister of foreign affairs, Mushir al-Dowleh, pled with the British to make representations with the Porte to prevent Sheikh Siddiq, Ubeydullah's son, from acting on his projected plan, in concert with the Merziki tribe of Sheref Bey and a section of the Iranian Shikak, to cross the frontier with the object of raiding Salmas and Urmia.<sup>356</sup> As it turned out Sheref Bey's retaliatory assault proceeded. An expedition was conducted against the village of Var, an Armenian revolutionary base in the district of Salmas, which led to the slaughter of one hundred sixty five Armenian individuals. The revengeful Kurds even assaulted the Iranian authorities by raping the governor of Khoi's wife and female guests, who happened to be having a picnic at Var on the day of the expedition. This latter brutality was intended as a message to the governor of Khoi for having allowed the Armenian *fedayis* to use Iranian soil as their base of

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<sup>354</sup> Currie to Salisbury, Constantinople, August 18, 1897, Turkey. No. 1, (1898), 259-260. The Armenian Hnchakist Committee denied any Armenian involvement in the bombings and instead blamed it on the Young Turks and declared the circulars broadcast were fabrication to tarnish the Armenians' image. See translation of Hnchakist Committee's reponse in inclosure no. 333, Currie to Salisbury, Constantinople, August 26, 1897, Turkey. No. 1, (1898), 269-70.

<sup>355</sup> Hardinge to Salisbury, Gulhek, August 19, 1897, Turkey. No. 1, (1898), 260.

<sup>356</sup> Hardinge to Salisbury, Gulhek, August 25, 1897, Turkey. No. 1, (1898), 263-64.

operation with impunity. Sheref Bey's ally, Sadun Bey, also forcibly converted the remaining seventeen Armenian households in Kotur.<sup>357</sup>

When Ottoman protestations and British pressure finally compelled the governor of Azerbaijan to issue sweeping orders for the arrest and deportation of the Armenian revolutionaries in Azerbaijan, a favorable opportunity opened up for corrupt Iranian provincial officials to extort the Armenian populations. They used the chaotic situation and lack of government supervision to accuse all Armenians as either active members or sympathizers in order to extort innocent people. Notably, the governor of Khoi and the Turkish consul, rounded up several revolutionaries, but since they afforded to pay bribes, they were able to obtain their freedom and make their way to Russia. Upon hearing such rumors, the Amir-i Nizam issued orders for the recapture of the Armenian revolutionaries but instead, the governor arrested and tortured innocent Armenians, who were then turned over to Ottoman authorities of Van for trial and punishment. In October of 1897, following the Amir-i Nizam's instructions from the shah, large numbers of Armenian and Nestorian refugees from the Ottoman districts of Albakh and Gawar were deported to Russia after gross mistreatment and extortions. The Iranian troops' temporary stationing of troops in Salmas and Khoi districts led to reduction of intercommunal tensions temporarily. The recommendation of the British consul at Tabriz sheds some light on the confused situation and the instability caused by the Armenian revolutionaries' use of Iranian territory:

If the Persian frontier ceased to be a sanctuary for these men the benefit conferred on the people not only there but above all in the whole of the Van Vilayet will be very great. Indeed unless a feeling of security succeeds to the miserable unrest and uncertainty that have prevailed of late years, the poverty and distress will increase and it is not difficult to foresee how it will end.<sup>358</sup>

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<sup>357</sup> Elliot to Currie, Tabriz, May 5, 1898, (FO 248/675).

<sup>358</sup> Ibid. Tabriz May 5, 1898 (from Elliot):

The situation deteriorated further as misgovernment in the province prevailed with Mohammad Ali Mirza succeeding his father as the crown prince in Azerbaijan. The British consul noted that during his six years of service in Tabriz, he had not experienced such a degree of corruption and power struggle within the provincial administration.<sup>359</sup> In Khoi, Zefar al-Saltaneh was replaced with an equally corrupt official, Zargham al-Mulk, who was tasked with removing the Armenian revolutionaries from the province. His extortions of the Muslim and Christian populations were noted but what brought him more to the British consul's notice was his willful murder and decapitation of several Armenians after the victims had made their submission to the authorities. The new governor also sought to coopt Jaffar Agha Shikak, who was in rebellion against Iran, by officially giving him the authority to hunt down Armenian revolutionaries on behalf of the government.<sup>360</sup>

Simultaneously, the Urmia authorities tried to reduce the power of the Somai and Baradost Shikaks, whose increased power was threatening the Afshar landlords' village properties. The proximity of Somai district to Urmia was complicated by Sheikh Siddiq's projection of power and influence into Tergawar and Mergawar, both of which districts were a short distance from Urmia itself. In light of such growing concerns, amplified by the American missionaries' representations on behalf of the Nestorians of Tergawar and the numerous refugees that had come over from Hakkari, the Urmia governor dispatched a force to exact tax arrears from Taymur Agha Shikak, who had been officially recognized as paramount chief of the Shikak confederation. The government regiments were reinforced by Kasim Agha Shikak, who vied with Taymur for paramountcy of the

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<sup>359</sup> Tabriz August 15, 1898 (No. 14):

<sup>360</sup> Wood to Minister at Tehran, Tabriz, November? 1898



confederation.<sup>361</sup> Thus, it appears that around Salmas, Kotur, and Khoi districts, where the Armenian revolutionary activity was centered, both the Ottoman and the Iranian states initially sought to appease the powerful Shikak tribes by authorizing them to use their swelling strength against the Armenian revolutionaries. In this region, which was of crucial strategic importance, the Ottoman Hamidiye institution's influence was temporarily extended into Iran through Mohammad Pasha and his son Jaffar Agha.

Therefore, it appears that the anxieties of the two states over the destabilizing effect of the Armenian revolutionaries prompted them to deploy the Kurdish frontier tribes against the Armenian guerillas' threat. Further south, however, where the Afshar khans, in collaboration with the American missionaries, focused on keeping their stronghold at Urmia safe, moved against the Shikaks whose power had become a threat to the Urmia landlords. The Ottoman state did not prevent such an action by the Urmia khans as they were more preoccupied with the Armenian revolutionaries and Iran's energetic action against them was welcome. The policy of keeping Kurdish power in check, while exploiting their strength against the Armenian threat, also informed the Ottoman policy of keeping Sheikh Siddiq in Nawchia but preventing him from making bold efforts to encroach on the disputed districts of Mergawar and Tergawar in Iran.

Sheikh Mohammad Siddiq, who was so reviled and feared and was also a constant source of anxiety to Iranian and British authorities for his designs to wrest back control of his confiscated property in Mergawar and for terrorizing the Nestorian Christians of Gawar and Tergawar, was not actually able to wield much influence among the Kurdish tribes of Hakkari and Urmia. His reputation as a fearful threat to stability stemmed from his father's invasion of Iran in 1880 in which Sheikh Siddiq had also taken part. These

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<sup>361</sup> Urmi 31 May 1898 (from Elliot):

concerns seem to have been misplaced as Sheikh Siddiq was not much in favor with the Kurds. In Gawar, he was at feud with Musa Bey of Khumaro, who often protected the Nestorians from the sheikh's hostilities. The south flank of his seat at Nehri was occupied by the sheikh of Barzan and there was no love lost between the two dignitaries. The nomadic *ashiret* of Herki under Karim Khan, who pastured their flocks in Gawar, Tergawar and Mergawar during the summer season, were also extremely hostile to the sheikh. In the summer of 1900, Karim Khan Herki had made an attack on the sheikh's men, killing some twenty of them.<sup>362</sup> The Shikaks of Baradost had also developed a feud with the sheikh over the treacherous murder of their chief Mohammad Amin Agha on orders of the sheikh.<sup>363</sup>

Such numerous feuds, a common feature of the tribal world of Kurdistan, had become more frequent and devastating as the frontiers had become the focus of increased state surveillance and imperial rivalry. The Ottoman government strove to incorporate the periphery of East Anatolia within central imperial control, but in light of diminished military power on account of its monumental financial deficits, its control was always partial and tenuous, hence its resort to instrumentalization of the frontier tribes. Similarly, Sheikh Siddiq's lack of ability to gather the tribes around him was thus not simply due to his treacherous conduct as violent pursuit of power was part and parcel of states and non-state actors' policies alike. Sheikh Siddiq was not able to unite the Kurds because state capacity had gradually increased in the periphery in the wake of Sheikh Ubeydullah's failed revolt but was never sufficiently strong to be able to eliminate intermediaries. This explains why the Ottoman state never acted on British pressure to banish the sheikh. His presence was necessary to keep Christian and Shi'i power in check but his power was

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<sup>362</sup> Van Nov 18, 1900 no47 Maunsell to O'Conner, p80:

<sup>363</sup> *Gozidah- i Asnad*, vol. 4, 554.

also warily watched lest it grew too much to replicate his father's challenges to the state. The sheikh, aware of this, kept his options open with occasional approaches to the Iranian authorities. For instance, in 1900, when the Ottoman government sought to collect tax arrears and conscript his subjects, he made overtures to the shah but he was turned down as he could not be trusted to cross the border in peace.<sup>364</sup>

Nevertheless, the rise of the Armenian revolutionaries' activities, which had increased the administrative chaos in Iranian Azerbaijan, led to the resurgence of Ottoman imperial power through the Hamidiye. Granted that the Hamidiye institution provided the Kurds with an official channel to empowerment, but this process took place by state design and with the purpose of further incorporation of the Kurdish nomadic tribes into the imperial fold as settled agriculturalists. From this perspective, the project was largely successful as numerous Kurdish *ashiret* tribesmen gradually displaced the Armenian peasantry and settled in their villages, and in this way came under stronger state control. However, state penetration of the periphery was still tenuous, as a combination of factors such as the rugged terrain, lack of an industrial tax base in the Ottoman Empire, and rival Russian efforts to draw the Kurds to themselves undermined a steady implementation of central control. The result was hundreds of small pockets of autonomous zones with nominal state control in the form a *mudir* of a *nahiye* [sub-district] or the *kaymakam* of a *kaza* in the vicinity of an administrative center such as Bashkale with a *mutasarrif* at the head of a small battalion of regular troops. The British vice-consul of Van, Major F. R. Maunsell described the situation as follows:

With a strong central Government, able to control the various factions, this kind of local self-government would be very suitable to these mountain districts, but as matters stand at present, the result is chaos with ceaseless intertribal quarrels, blood feuds, murders, pillage and raids. There is no prominent leader just at

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<sup>364</sup> *Guzidah-yi Asnad*, Vol. 4, 462-65.

present to make the situation particularly dangerous to the Government, and there are many sections bitterly hostile to one another.<sup>365</sup>

This situation also applied to the Nestorian *ashirets* of Hakkari, who also were riven by numerous discords, blood feuds, and constant skirmishes with their Kurdish and Nestorian neighbors. When vice-consul Major Maunsell visited Hakkari in the fall of 1900, he expressed concern about the participation of the Nestorian tribesmen of Jilu in Suto Agha's quarrel with the rival tribe of Reikan. Maunsell was concerned that the Nestorians' participation in the raids could turn into a long-lasting blood feud with grave consequences for the Christian *ashirets*. Apparently, this section of the Jilu tribesmen were at feud with their co-religionists in Baz and had responded to Suto's call in the hope that they can enlist the Kurdish Agha's support against their Baz rivals. Singling out the Christian plight as one to be taken note of and reported to the *vali*, Maunsell asked the Ottoman governor to take appropriate measures against Suto's raids into the Christian valleys.<sup>366</sup>

What Major Maunsell missed, however, was that his exclusive representations on behalf of the Christian inhabitants could actually produce unintended results as they had on previous occasions. While feuding tribes did suffer from constant intertribal skirmishes, aggravated by an intermittent and tenuous state presence, such biased attention to one group against another could lead to more disastrous results. In the traditional tribal world, tribes made cross alliances regardless of their religious distinctions. However, in light of increased missionary presence among the Nestorians and the marked interest of the great powers in them, such tribal feuds and cross alliances held the potential to become focused on the group receiving what could be perceived as

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<sup>365</sup> Maunsell to O'Conner, Van, November 18, 1900, no. 47, The Record of the Kurds, 80.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid.

undue attention in times of crisis. It must not have been hard for the British government to predict that such representations could invite hostilities to the Christians by the Muslim majority, especially in the event of a war between the Ottoman Empire and the great powers. However, in the high tide of imperialism, gaining advantages at the expense of rivals at any cost and by any means, was the imperative informing policy. Supporting Christians was one way to build influence in East Anatolia, as failing to do so meant that the Nestorians would have fallen into the Russian orbit.

In May 1900, Jaffar Agha and Mohammad Pasha Shikak, once again went over to Van in order to discuss the possibility of their resettlement inside the Ottoman frontier near Bashkale. Their base in Iran was no longer as strong in the face of Iran's attempts to pacify the frontiers through replacing one tribal chief with another, which had created a fierce struggle for power among numerous rival Shikak chiefs. Mohammad Pasha pleaded with the *vali* of Van to grant him permission to build a house in an Armenian village near Bashkale. The *vali*, however, aware of Mohammad Pasha's enmity with Sheref Bey, his past record of switching alliances, and the complications that may arise from his settlement in the vicinity of his home base in Chahriq in Iran, turned down his request and asked him to settle in Van instead. Settlement in Van under the watchful eyes of Ottoman authorities was not an option for Mohammad Pasha. Disappointed and frightened, he swiftly crossed the frontier back to Chahriq along with his son Jaffar. After his departure, the *vali* of Van sent instructions for his arrest upon his renewed attempts to enter Ottoman territory. A battalion of infantry was also deployed at Deir, a village in Sheref Bey's territory on the Bashkale-Salmas road to keep order at the frontier. Shortly after, Sheref Bey was also summoned to Van by Marshal Zeki Pasha, the architect of the Hamidiye regiments. On account of his enmity with Jaffar Agha, Sheref Bey had recently launched numerous expeditions into his rival's territory in Iran. The authorities of

Bashkale were not able to restrain him because, as a Hamidiye colonel, he remained beyond the reach of the civil administration. Upon his summons to Van by Zeki Pasha, the British vice-consul assumed the government attempted to remove troublesome chiefs.<sup>367</sup> Sheref Bey's reappointment, however, undermined his argument as this was not a recall but rather a strengthening of the Ottoman Hamidiye chiefs with the object of turning the disputed districts in Iran into a de facto Ottoman buffer zone against future Armenian, Iranian, and Russian threats.

Later in the fall of 1900, the governor of Urmia, Imam Qoli Mirza Afshar, took a series of successful expeditions against the Shikaks of Somai and Baradost, capturing one of the numerous notable chiefs by the name of Mohammad Amin. Mohammad Amin Shikak was soon released on bail after his followers had collected the exorbitant ransom through raiding the outlying villages.<sup>368</sup> During Imam Qoli's expeditions against the Shikaks to pacify the frontiers in the vicinity of Urmia, Jaffar Agha, who had purportedly figured prominently in the robberies, was left unharmed. Musa Khan, the head of the Iranian frontier commission, reported that Jaffar had established a special relationship with Imam Qoli Mirza, the governor of Urmia. It turns out that, having been disillusioned with the Ottoman authorities, the younger and more ambitious Jaffar Agha had colluded with the Urmia governor to unseat his father from the lordship of Chahriq. The Ottoman authorities' restriction of Mohammad Aghas' access to the Ottoman frontiers meant that the chiefs' previous privileges through the Hamidiye were curtailed. Stripped of his Ottoman rank and his possessions at Chahriq, Mohammad Agha, who was also wanted

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<sup>367</sup> Maunsell to O'Connor, Van, no. 23, 4 June 1900

<sup>368</sup> Maunsell to O'Conner, Van, November 18, 1900 no. 47, p80: It appears from the British and Persian documents that Mohammad Amin Shikak was released on bail but later ended up being killed by Sheikh Siddiq's order while he had sought refuge with the sheikh. This incident had driven a wedge between the sheikh and the Shikaks of Baradost, as the British vice-consul of Van, Maunsell reported on November 18, 1900.

by the Iranian government, responded quickly to such a turnabout. He hurried to Tabriz, where he received pardon from Mozaffar al-Din Shah on his way to Europe.<sup>369</sup> Mohammad Agha's generous gift convinced the shah to confirm his appointment as the lawful chief of Chahriq. However, as it appears from Musa Khan's report, Jaffar Agha remained the de facto lord of Chahriq in February 1901. The overlapping authority of the two chiefs was reflected in their double taxation of the *ra'ayah* of their subject villages.<sup>370</sup>

Musa Khan warned the Tabriz officials against the sidelining of Mohammad Agha by the governor of Urmia, maintaining that such action could lead to further disturbances in Salmas. He noted that Mohammad Agha could be driven into Sheref Bey's camp, a development that would undermine Iran's interests as Sheref Bey and his in-law, Sultan Agha Shikak, had already extended their authority to the strategic pass of Kotur from where they launched raids against the low-land villages of Salmas.<sup>371</sup> Musa Khan's reports annoyed the Amir-i Nizam, who accused him of producing false statements and unnecessary complications in the frontier question. And before long, the shah issued orders for his recall, leaving the frontier to the whims of provincial officials and rival Kurdish chiefs at the expense of the oppressed cultivators.<sup>372</sup>

Jaffar Agha of Avdoi section of the Shikak confederation fell out with the Iranian government again in 1904 and 1905 and retreated into Hakkari after his men "made a good fight against the troops of the Persian Government." His defeat was attributed to the support his rival Shikak chief, Musto [Mustafa] Agha of Kerdar, had offered the Iranian troops in order to acquire the lordship of the castle of Chahriq. The *vali* of Van wrote to

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<sup>369</sup> *Gozidah- i Asnad*, vol. 4, 463.

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*, 463 and 481-82.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 4, 462.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 4, 788.

the Porte that he would not want Jaffar Agha in his *vilayet* and if his petition for settlement was to be accepted, he recommended his removal to the interior districts as far away as Mardin.<sup>373</sup> Jaffar's correspondence with the British vice-consul, Captain Tyrrell reveals his difficult position between four unfriendly states (Iranian, Ottoman, British, and Russian), with vested interests in the demarcation of the Ottoman-Iranian frontier. Jaffar Agha's letter, addressed to the Emperor of Great Britain, described his situation as follows:

For many years my ancestors, being Chiefs of 10,000 families of the Shekak tribe, have been famous. My habitation and native land was in Persian territory, and it is well known that I never drew back in any way from doing service to the Persian Government. The control of that part of the Shekak tribe which is in the Province of Azerbaijan and the district of Chari [Chahriq] was allotted to me by the Persian Government, and from time to time I was the recipient of jeweled swords and various kinds of decorations from the Persian Government on account of my service and faithfulness on the frontier; and this year, without cause, a large army with guns was sent against me by the Persian Government. After some days' fighting, the loss which I sustained from [the action of] the Persian Government was more than 10,000 L. With a few families of my tribe I abandoned my home, and, helpless, migrated. On account of the unreliability of the telegraph offices and of the local Governments on the Turkish frontier, I forwarded a petition to His Majesty the Sultan Abdul Hamid through the Vali of Bitlis. Orders for the acceptance of my submission and for our settlement were issued by the Government. The Vali of Van and the Mutessarif of Hakkari, having taken bribes from certain officials, did not give effect to the orders of the Government, and left me with my tribe in the summer pastures on the frontier. 250 of my men have died from the rigours of the winter; we have not been able to bury them, and even now some of our corpses have remained under the snow. Now we have remained helpless and without remedy. These few words of petition from your servant I have presented through Captain Tyrrell, British Consul at Van, to the glorious capital of England. If God wills, doubtless [my petition] will be accepted and fulfilled. The English Government is so powerful and able that it will command our unhindered settlement, either by the Persian Government or else in the territory of the Ottoman Government. If these things may not be, let us be settled

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<sup>373</sup> Tyrrell to Townley, Van, February 4, 1905, inclosure 1 in no. 31 forwarded to Nicholas O'Connor, *Record of the Kurds*, Vol. 4, 159.



in the territory of the English Government. Be pleased to command an answer to the petition of your servant through the Van Consul, Captain Tyrrell.<sup>374</sup>

The Shikak chief's petition reveals the complicated and precarious situation of the Shikak tribes on the frontier at the height of imperial rivalry over the Ottoman-Iranian frontier. His appeals for settlement through British officials suggests that the tribal chiefs, cognizant of European colonial domination in the Ottoman and Iranian frontier zone, needed to navigate a more complicated situation with a host of local, imperial, and colonial competitors. However, for that, the Kurdish chiefs were ill-equipped. Jaffar Agha's petition for settlement through the mediation of the British government and his request for asylum at the British vice-consulate were rejected. Tyrrell instead advised him not to waste his time with complaints to his superiors and recommended that he seek Ottoman and Iranian authorities' help in his resettlement.

Jaffar Agha's final end is a poignant reminder of the ruthlessness of the dawning world order of fixed subjects and boundaries. While his father's and his own services to the Ottoman and Iranian states had been sought and exploited during the Armenian disturbances, he was no longer wanted and his past record of constantly switching alliances worked against him. He was left with few options. Upon his disappointment with the Ottoman and British officials, Jaffar once again appealed to the Azerbaijan authorities for reconsidering his pleas for amnesty and settlement. To induce his submission, the crown prince at Tabriz, Mohammad Ali Mirza, sent several *mujtahids* to Jaffar with a guarantee of a royal pardon presented to him in the form of a signed copy of the Quran. When Jaffar finally consented and made his way to Tabriz, according to

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<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

Tyrrell, the *valiahd* wanted him killed immediately. However, on account of the *mujtahids*' intervention, his execution was delayed.

The Iranian historian of the constitutional revolution Ahmad Kasravi reported that Jaffar Agha stayed for a month in Tabriz where he was assigned the task of policing the Armenian quarters of the city in the company of a small armed retinue. Meanwhile, he was pressed to pay 5,000 tumans in tax arrears and indemnities, which he could not afford. Upon his intention to depart from Tabriz, Jaffar Agha was called for a final audience with Nizam al-Saltaneh Mafi, the acting governor of Tabriz in the absence of Mohammad Ali Mirza in Tehran. In a similar manner which recalls the treacherous murder of Hamza Agha of Mangur to mind, Jaffar Agha Shikak was shot dead in the governor's house while his escort kept guard outside. The rapport of the guns was enough to alert his escort to the danger. Jaffar's men galloped down the streets of Tabriz, shooting some fifteen pedestrians before making their escape out of town. The British consul of Tabriz noted:

On the evening of the 5th instant [July], he [Jaffar Agha] called on the Governor General to say goodbye and was shot down in that functionary's anteroom.... Next morning the bodies of Jaffer Agha and his two followers were dragged naked through the streets to the square adjoining the Valiahd's palace and there hung up by the heels for inspection of the public. The effect on the public security in the district of Salmas is likely to be deplorable. Jaffer Agha's brother [Simko], who will succeed to his position, is supposed to be even a greater ruffian than himself, and will be bound by Kurdish etiquette to do all he can to avenge his brother's death. Such little confidence as the Kurds had in the good faith of the Persian government will disappear, and all peaceful negotiations between the parties for some time rendered impossible.<sup>375</sup>

The British consul's premonitions would prove prescient as Jaffar Agha's brother, Ismail Agha Simko, would take his vendetta against the Iranian government to a new level. He would kill and plunder like a tribal chief but he would also come to play a prominent role

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<sup>375</sup> Stevens to Grant Duff, Tabriz, July 19, 1905, no. 30, (FO 248/851).

in the Kurdish-Nestorian intercommunal massacres during the war to emerge as a formidable power magnate in the Urmia environs pursuing the idea of leading a Sunni Kurdish nation. The story of Simko and his prominent Ottoman Kurdish allies, Abdürrezzak Bedirhan and Sayyid Taha of Shamdinan will be discussed in chapter five in the context of the Ottoman and later Russian occupation of the frontier districts of Iranian Azerbaijan.

Thus, in the 1890s, parallel processes on several fronts combined to draw certain sections of the Iranian Kurdish tribes of Salmas into the Kurdish-Armenian intercommunal strife. While popular protests among the Shi'i subjects of the shah became more assertive against the Iranian government's corruption and granting of concessions to foreign powers, the Armenian armed activities, with the aim of provoking great power intervention, became more coherent and threatening to Ottoman interests along its frontiers with Iran. These developments were coterminous with Andülhamid II's conservative policy of pan-Islamism, which built up his predecessors' efforts to invest in the sectarian identity of the Sunni subjects to secure their loyalties. Abdülhamid II pushed those policies further by creating the Hamidiye Light Cavalry as a sectarian militia against the threat of Armenian bands. In the process, both Armenians and Kurds came to view each other at polar opposites of a sectarian war with opposing colonial and imperial patrons who pursued different agendas in their support for the local groups.

The establishment of the Hamidiye institution provided an opportunity to the Iranian Shikak Kurds to regroup through availing themselves of Ottoman backing as Hamidiye chiefs. This situation temporarily brought some of the Iranian Shikak tribes together under the authority of Mohammad Pasha and his son, Jaffar Agha, who nevertheless kept in touch with Iranian authorities in order to pursue their own interests and resist settlement initiatives by the Ottoman state authorities. The two chiefs became

deeply involved in sectarian frictions with Armenian bands as part of the extension of the Ottoman Hamidiye institution into Iranian territory, which would serve as a blueprint for the later Ottoman initiative to integrate the Sunni Kurds of the northwestern Iranian frontiers by extending the Hamidiye incentives to Iranian Kurds. In other words, the success of the Hamidiye project in East Anatolia, which manifested in neutralizing the Armenian threat and inducing Kurdish *ashirets* to settle, persuaded the sultan to replicate the Hamidiye institution in Iran. This policy represented yet a new phase in the imperial politics of subjecthood, whereby the loyalties of the borderlanders was sought through highlighting their sectarian identities as special subjects with special privileges in opposition to great-power backed Christian groups.

As the threat of Armenian revolutionary activities diminished in the late 1890s, the Ottoman government withdrew its support from the Iranian Shikak chiefs especially as they also rebuffed Ottoman overtures for their settlement. Such withdrawal of support coincided with Iranian efforts to drive out the Armenian revolutionaries from Salmas and Khoi and to reduce the power of the Shikak chiefs. As a result, the Shikak chiefs fell into a vicious cycle of intertribal rivalry and internecine struggle. As violence became endemic, the weak Iranian state in the throes of a revolutionary struggle resorted to assassination tactics to eliminate defiant Kurdish chiefs. Such treacherous dealings with the Kurds, which increased tremendously under Mohammad Ali Mirza's tenure as crown prince at Tabriz (1896-1906), created a gulf between the Iranian Shi'i authorities of Azerbaijan and certain sections of the Shikak confederation in the strategic frontier districts of Kotur and Salmas. The outbreak of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution widened this gulf further as the newly inaugurated parliament instituted Twelver Shi'ism and the Persian language as the official religion and language of the emergent nation-state. The subsequent splintering of the Iranian government into pro-constitutional

*anjumans* [popular revolutionary committees] and loyalist forces in the wake of Mohammad Ali Shah's coup in 1907 led to the commencement of a chaotic situation in which the Kurdish tribes, especially the Avdoi section of the Shikak under Jaffar Agha's brother, Simko, took the loyalist side as Armenian *fedayis* sided with the revolutionary *anjuman* of Tabriz. The concomitant Ottoman occupation of the Sunni Kurdish frontier districts in Iran would provide the ideological framework needed for crystalizing the sectarian divide between Kurdish tribes, Shi'i landlords and clerics, and the Nestorian and Armenian cultivators and guerilla bands.

## **Chapter 4: “Between Two Storms”: The Communities of Northwest Iran and the American Mission amidst Ottoman Occupation and Iranian Revolution**

On March 9, 1904, a group of Kurds from the Begzadeh tribe of the Dasht district, located several miles west of Urmia city on the disputed frontier ridges between Qajar Iran and the Ottoman Empire, murdered Rev. Benjamin Labaree of the American Presbyterian Mission. This premediated assassination, perpetrated by a coalition of Sunni Kurdish tribesmen and an outlaw Shi'i *sayyid* [presumed descendent of prophet Mohammad], marked a new episode in the deterioration of already strained inter-communal relations among the religiously diverse populations of the Urmia region. Coming like “a thunderbolt from the sky,” the murder shocked the long-established American missionary community of Urmia. The missionaries had made inroads into every community around Urmia through establishing links with the governing and tribal elites and conceived of their activities as immensely beneficial to all classes alike. The Americans quickly took action by dispatching the news of the horror to the British consul at Tabriz and enlisting the support of the Urmia deputy governor. News also reached Washington, D.C. via the Presbyterian mission headquarters in New York, prompting Congress to press the matters with the Iranian government for a vigorous investigation and the punishment of the perpetrators.

The culprits, however, were not within easy reach as they occupied a disputed frontier zone between two Muslim powers at odds with one another over the demarcation of the mountainous district inhabited by the Kurdish tribe. Besides the contentious question of undetermined sovereignty over the Dasht district and the surrounding countryside, there was the geographical challenge of a rugged mountainous terrain impeding the extension of full government authority. Moreover, there was the complexity

of the method of punishment for the crime. How was the punishment to be carried out in light of the crown prince's reluctant attitude to prosecute the Kurds and later the splintering of Iranian government authority in the course of the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911)?

Added to the difficulty was the fact that the Kurdish perpetrators had entered into an alliance with the Shi'i ecclesiastics of Urmia, an unusual turn of events as the Sunni Kurds frequently engaged in raiding the lowland Shi'i-populated districts. The leading figure in the crime was a Shi'i *sayyid*, who enjoyed the support of the chief *mujtahid* [Muslim jurisprudent] of Urmia. To turn the situation into a Gordian knot, the Qajar crown prince as the highest authority in Azerbaijan, was locked in a fierce feud with the Afshar khans of Urmia, the American missionaries' main allies in the fray. The American missionaries and the British consul as their protector faced an extremely complicated situation as the northwest Iranian frontier, where the American mission and the culprits' tribal territory were located, came under Ottoman occupation. The expanding occupation and the ebb and flow of the Iranian revolutionary movement in Azerbaijan, with its center at Tabriz, created a chaotic situation, which encouraged the Kurds to ramp up their defiance of Iranian authority and hostilities to the American mission. This was the first time the mission had been targeted by the Kurds, an event that clearly demonstrated a nadir in strained relations among the Muslim inhabitants and the foreign missions as the protectors of the region's Christians.<sup>376</sup>

What followed the murder was a long-drawn-out process of prosecution that lasted until 1907, when the Ottoman state forces defeated the Iranian punitive expedition

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<sup>376</sup> For accounts of the murder of Benjamin Labaree see, John Joseph, *The Nestorians and their Muslim neighbors: a study of western influence on their relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Oriental Studies, 1961); Robert E. Speer, *The Hakim Sahib: The foreign doctor; a biography of Joseph Plumb Cochran, M.D., of Persia* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1911); Albert Charles Wratishlaw, *A Consul in the East* (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood, 1924).

against the Begzadeh Kurds on account of the irregular authorization of the expedition.<sup>377</sup> The Kurdish chiefs were arrested in 1905 only to be released a year later. The Ottoman occupation forces moved into the Iranian Sunni-Kurdish frontier zone, claiming to defend Sunni Kurds who had applied to the sultan for protection.<sup>378</sup> The Americans were left with few options but to accept the *fait accompli* and consider the case closed after receiving an indemnity.<sup>379</sup>

In the process, as the Qajar government was pulled into the turmoil of the Constitutional Revolution, the initial shock which had puzzled both the American missionaries and their Anglican counterparts, soon gave way to the sobering realization that their role as representatives of the Nestorians in their conflicts with the region's other ethno-religious groups was not viewed as a benevolent practice for the greater good of the communities involved. The incident also strained the relations between the Kurdish tribes and the American missionaries, who became more motivated in making representations on behalf of the Nestorians of Urmia against the Ottoman-backed Kurdish tribes. This mutual animosity between the missionaries and the Kurds coincided with the emergence of nationalist sentiments, assemblies, and publications among the Nestorians. The Americans aided this process of change with the aim of unifying the Nestorian communities of Urmia and Hakkari under the leadership of Mar Shimun so they could hold out against the hostile Kurds. In the wake of the murder of Labaree, the American missionaries could not reconcile with the Kurds and progressively viewed the Kurds through a sectarian lens as Sunni marauders like their Ottoman patrons. Such a

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<sup>377</sup> The Ottoman commander dispatched a letter to the Iranian official Majd al-Saltaneh, in which he stated that the expedition was illegitimate because it was authorized by the Tabriz *anjuman*. See, "Report by Rev O. H. Parry (English Mission head of Archbishop's Assyrian Mission) respecting the Frontier Dispute between Turkey and Persia, English Mission, Urmi, August 27, 1907," Schofield IV, 148-51.

<sup>378</sup> Ateş, *Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands*, 246-48.

<sup>379</sup> Joseph, *Nestorians and their Muslim Neighbors*, 123-27.



missionary stance would ultimately lead the American mission head to actively aid the Nestorians during the World War I in their atrocities against Muslims in cooperation with Russian officials and Nestorian militias.

In order to investigate the Kurdish-missionary fall-out in 1904, the events of the recent years need to be reviewed first. Following the Armenian-Kurdish conflicts in 1894-98, which took place through the Porte's backing of the Hamidiye officers, the Iranian Kurdish tribes became more active in conducting raids and, as a result, both inter-tribal feuds and Sunni-Shi'i sectarian relations deteriorated. These circumstances became more infused with sectarian animosities as the inhabitants of Azerbaijan increasingly appealed to Shi'i symbols and practices to organize protests under clerical leadership against government corruption and foreign dominance over financial institutions.

An incident involving the Ottoman vice-consul in Tabriz in 1893 points to the heightened sectarian resentment against Ottoman officials on the grounds of being Sunnis. On September 21, 1893, the British consul of Tabriz reported that the Ottoman vice-consul Enver Bey was returning to town in the company of a European couple. It was the anniversary of the death of Omer, the second Caliph of Islam, and crowds in different quarters of Tabriz and the suburbs were conducting the customary Shi'i ritual of burning effigies of the Sunni Caliph. As Enver Bey's carriage was passing through the crowd, his Ottoman fez drew the attention of the crowd to the Osmanli official as a Sunni Muslim. In the face of the brewing agitation, Enver Bey decided to assert his authority by declaring his official position and the immunity he enjoyed as a representative of a foreign government. However, as he was addressing the crowd, a certain Karbalayi Mohammad Ahrabi suddenly fired a shot at Enver Bey. He missed but managed to kill one of the carriage horses. The assailant quickly reloaded his pistol and fired another shot only to severely wound the second horse. At this point, Mohammad Arabi, who was

known as a notorious murderer, knocked down a horseman arriving on the scene and made his escape but not before cutting down another two Armenian pedestrians. The European couple escaped unharmed as the target of the mob's wrath was the Ottoman official.<sup>380</sup>

This incident clearly suggests that as the Iranian protest movement gained momentum in the 1890s, its anti-foreign dimension extended to the Ottoman state officials as well. It also shows that the revolutionary movement assumed a sectarian overtone in the province of Azerbaijan where frontier security concerns involved Ottoman and Sunni Kurdish incursions into Iranian territory. Manifestation of such sectarian animosity against the Ottoman vice-consul of Tabriz was not without basis as the Ottoman state had been supplying the Kurds with material and symbolic resources to fight its battle against Armenian revolutionaries and to advance Ottoman frontier claims at the expense of Iran. For instance, in 1894, Mozaffar al-Din Mirza, the crown prince, notified the Iranian ambassador in Istanbul to protest the Ottoman *şehbender*'s [consul] interference in the administration of the town by extending offers of protection to Iranian Sunni subjects such as Haji Ismail. Apparently, upon the Iranian *karpardaz*'s detention of Haji Ismail, the Ottoman consul had issued warnings to the effect that he would personally take action and create disturbances if Haji Ismail was not released. The Ottoman consul had strengthened his position among the Sunni population of Savujbulagh by allowing Kurdish exiled rebels to return to the town. Similarly, in

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<sup>380</sup> Wood to Lascelles, Tabriz, September 21, 1893, (FO 248/571). The Crown Prince Mozaffar al-Din Mirza, in his report to the shah, mentioned that the rituals had banned in Tabriz for several years and every year fresh warnings were given on their illegality. The crown prince also emphasized that Mohammad Ahrabi had mental problems and had not meant to assassinate the Ottoman Consul, adding that Mohammad had been drunk on the day of the incident and had been firing shots in the air, one of which had accidentally hit the consul's carriage horse. According to his report, Mohammad Ahrabi had made his escape and his father, whom he had also wanted to kill on previous occasions, had been compelled to compensate the Ottoman official for the loss of his horse. See, *Guzidah-yi Asnad*, Vol. 3, 302-306

January 1896, the *karpardaz* of Savujbulagh wrote to the foreign ministry that a certain Haji Qadir Panbechi, a member of Haji Ismail's Ottoman-backed clique, had claimed Ottoman citizenship and attempted to register property title deeds as an Ottoman subject.<sup>381</sup> The shah's comment on the letter also indicated that Ottoman extension of subjecthood and protection to Sunnis had created challenges to Iranian sovereignty in Sanandaj as well.

In March 1895, as the Kurdish-Armenian conflict raged across the border in Ottoman East Anatolia, Dr. Joseph P. Cochran of the American mission in Urmia, dispatched a letter to the British consul at Tabriz with a grave premonition: "The Kurds have heard of the massacres in Turkey, they are fired with religious zeal and if the consuls and authorities in Tabriz do not put a stop to this they will massacre the Christians here."<sup>382</sup> Cochran was referring to what looked like an imminent confrontation between the Kurdish tribes of Mamash under Mohammad Agha Mirpanj and the Karapapakh khans of Solduz over a scuffle involving a Nestorian and a Kurdish villager from Solduz. The tension, originating from a regular village quarrel, had quickly transformed into a much larger confrontation between Kurds, Christians, and Shi'is.

One day in March 1895 at midday, a young Nestorian man was on his way to a mill with food for his father. In crossing a main road, he passed a Kurdish woman. It happened that a group of three Kurdish men were also taking the same road. One of the Kurds, who had previously gotten into a fight with the Nestorian man and had become a fugitive in a different village, took the opportunity to take his revenge and fired a gun at the Nestorian but missed. "From his fear the Kurd goes off and proclaims everywhere

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<sup>381</sup> *Guzidah-yi Asnad*, Vol. 3, 299 and 310.

<sup>382</sup> Cochran to Robert Paton (passed on to Consul Wood in Tabriz), Urumia, March 18, 1895, No. 18, (FO 248/614).

that he saw this Christian on that Kurdish woman.”<sup>383</sup> The news of the Kurdish woman’s dishonoring agitated her husband and relatives, prompting them to take action to repair their tarnished image. Probably the shame they felt was considerably more as a Muslim woman had been assaulted by a Christian man.

As tradition held, quarreling parties either had to take revenge personally or through the more proper channel of government authorities. They settled on the second option and complained to Haydar Khan, the governor of Solduz, who as a government official and a member of the Shi’i Karapapakh khans (landlords) of the district had authority over his Kurdish, Nestorian, and Shi’i subjects. So far tradition was upheld as rural litigants took their quarrel to their overlord for redress. Haydar Khan also did what was expected of him. As soon as he heard the complaints, he put the Nestorian man under custody and confiscated his horse and started a thorough examination. Faced with what they saw as an outright slander, the leading Armenians and Nestorians of Solduz came together and requested that the governor call witnesses. He did so but finding no one to testify against the Nestorian youth, he decided to release him. The governor’s decision was protested by the woman’s relatives. In response, Haydar Khan also called Kurdish witnesses, including the woman, who testified to the innocence of the accused Christian. At this point, the Kurds dragged the woman away, tied her to a post, and beat her until she agreed to claim that “the Christian had criminally attacked her.”<sup>384</sup>

Having received no favorable redress from the government authorities and their overlord, the allegedly assaulted woman’s relatives appealed to the powerful chief of the Mamash Kurds, Mohammad Agha Mirpanj who was the officially appointed governor of

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<sup>383</sup> Ibid.

<sup>384</sup> Cochran to Wood, Urumia, March 18, 1895, (FO 248/614).

the disputed frontier district of Lahijan.<sup>385</sup> Although the report, written by the preachers and teachers of Solduz in connection with the American mission at Urmia, stated that the Kurds reached out to the Kurdish Mamash chief because the woman's husband was a subject of Mohammad Agha, it is clear that their appeal to the Kurdish chief was also driven by sectarian and political motives. Mohammad Agha was under Iranian state scrutiny due to his brother's rebellion, which was supported by Ottoman authorities. In fact, Ottoman attempts to seize Iranian territory and win the loyalty of the Sunni Kurdish subjects of Iran had gained momentum. According to a news article published in the Ottoman newspaper *İkdam*, the disputed Mamash-controlled district of Vazneh was being incorporated with that Pijdar by imperial and was renamed Mamuret al-Hamid.<sup>386</sup>

Having felt confident that the cause of Muslim subjects should have taken priority over that of Christians, the Kurdish litigants of Solduz were disappointed in the adjudication of a Shi'i khan. Mohammad Agha's correspondence left no doubt about such a sectarian framing of the quarrel. The powerful Mamash chieftain, who carried the government issued military title of Mirpanj, addressed Haydar Khan and Najaf Qoli Khan of Solduz vehemently, "Where is your zeal that you should allow a Christian to do so to a Moslem woman. Agha Jahan not having actually done this was killed. Where is your zeal. Kill him [the Nestorian youth] or send him to me and I will kill him."<sup>387</sup> Invoking the example of Agha Jan, an Armenian merchant who had been murdered by a mob in Urmia in August of 1893 for having allegedly assaulted a Shi'i Muslim woman,<sup>388</sup> Mohammad Agha was obviously furious that the Shi'i khans of Solduz had exhibited bias in the case of their Sunni subjects. The petition sent by the American mission's preachers

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<sup>385</sup> *Guzidah-yi Asnad*, Vol. 4, 125 and 200.

<sup>386</sup> *Guzidah-yi Asnad*, Vol. 4, 21.

<sup>387</sup> Cochran to Wood, Urumia, March 18, 1895, (FO 248/614).

<sup>388</sup> Wood to Lascelles, Tabriz, August 30, 1893, no. 25, (FO 248/571).

and teachers of Solduz added that all the Shi'i Karapapakhs were on their side and had actually encouraged them to appeal to Dr. Cochran and the British consul of Tabriz with the aim of compelling the Iranian government to restrain Mohammad Agha.

The report, which was written by native Nestorian preachers connected with the American mission, clearly points to the emergence of new communal boundaries among isolated Nestorian communities of the plains of Salmas, Urmia, and Solduz. While these communities had loose linkages with their patriarch, Mar Shimun, in Hakkari (to whom they paid certain annual tithes),<sup>389</sup> they were the subjects of their Karapapakh khans and their pleas for help should have followed the traditional hierarchy from the khan to the local governor, then to Tabriz authorities and finally to the shah, if that ever became necessary. Instead, as clearly stated in the report, the Nestorians and Armenians came together as a united Christian community to press their rights with the khan, and then to present their case not to the Iranian authorities of Tabriz directly but to the American missionaries and the British consul to make representations on their behalf. The American missionary institution had become the local Christians' source of reference and protection. The fact that the khans of Solduz, who were the rivals of the Mamash Kurds, also encouraged the Nestorians to appeal to the missionaries and the British consul suggests that the Shi'i khans recognized the power of their Nestorian and Armenian subjects as a Christian community with powerful international backers.

Moreover, it points to the redefinition of communal boundaries and politics within a sectarian framework as the local khans also leveraged this Christian communal power of representation to their own advantage against their traditional Mamash rivals. The Kurdish litigants' resort to a Sunni Kurdish chief, who precisely defended them on the

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<sup>389</sup> Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, 55.

basis of their religious affiliation, also testifies to the sectarianization of traditional and tribal politics. Mohammad Agha did not simply upbraid the Karapapakh khans for having failed to administer justice but he indirectly accused them of their bias towards Sunni subjects. The murder of the Armenian Agha Jan in Urmia by a mob for having assaulted a Shi'i Muslim woman, even though his innocence was known to Mohammad Agha, was presented as evidence of the khans' breach of the emergent sectarian dynamics. The threat posed by Mohammad Agha to the Nestorian community of Solduz was neutralized for the time being through government intervention on their behalf. However, that was to serve merely as a temporary solution to a lingering problem.

#### **FROM INTER-TRIBAL FRICTIONS TO SECTARIAN STRIFE:**

Another incident that indicates the entrenchment of a sectarian culture in the frontier zone among the Kurdish and Nestorian tribes of Urmia occurred in 1903. In April of that year, the Kurds of Dasht, a mixed Kurdish-Christian sub-district of Tergawar in Iran, clashed with the Nestorians of Balulan village over the rustling of a sheep fold. When the Kurds of Ambi village assembled to wrest back their stolen property, in the course of the skirmishes, the Nestorians shot Kilich Beg, a favored chief among the Begzadeh Kurds of Dasht. This young chief was doted on by the other Kurdish chiefs on account of his prominent standing as the favorite son of the noted chieftain, Hesu Beg. Dr. Joseph Cochran of the American Mission in Urmia scaled the mountains to treat the wounded chief. He acknowledged that the Nestorians had initiated the hostilities in this case. Anglican missionary Edgar Wigram also pointed to the Nestorians' practice of mockery of Muslim saints as a source of aggravation of the conflict. His account of the events is more picturesque: "Grazing quarrels started it, as usual; but it must be owned that the hot heads among the Christians did their best to aggravate matters. They had a

trick of ridiculing the differences between *Shiah* and *Sunni* among Mussulmans, by labeling one dog “Ali” and another “Mohammad,” dressing them up as soldier and *mollah*, and then setting them to fight; and this might well have angered more peaceable people than their Begzadi neighbors.”<sup>390</sup> The aggression on the part of the Nestorians had outraged the Kurds, who were already embittered by the support the Nestorians received from Salar al-Dowleh, their landlord, who was also the governor of Urmia.<sup>391</sup> As the sole proprietor of Tergawar and the highest political authority in the Urmia district, Salar al-Dowleh had armed his Nestorian tenants to protect his personal land properties in Tergawar and to shield the plains of Urmia and Solduz from Kurdish raiding.

The Nestorian villages, located in the vicinity of the frontier, served as a buffer between the Kurdish tribes of Tergawar and Mergawar and Urmia city from the perspective of Shi’i inhabitants of Urmia and the Iranian government. The issue was more complicated as the district of Tergawar (where the Begzadeh Kurds and the Nestorians clashed) was highly contested by the Ottoman and Iranian governments, especially since the area had strategical importance. According to Wigram, the Ottoman state sought annexation of the district as it provided

an easy passage practicable in the depth of winter, from Armenia to Kirkuk and Baghdad. And it was probably for this reason that the Ottoman Government so coveted the possession of this district; for it afforded them the means of moving the Baghdad army corps to the Russian frontier, without making the long detour to the west that would otherwise be necessitated by the mountains of Kurdistan.<sup>392</sup>

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<sup>390</sup> W. A Wigram and Edgar Thomas Ainger Wigram, *The Cradle of Mankind; Life in Eastern Kurdistan*, (London: A. & C. Black, 1922), 190. W. A Wigram and Edgar Thomas Ainger Wigram, *The Cradle of Mankind; Life in Eastern Kurdistan*, (London: A. & C. Black, 1922), 190.

<sup>391</sup> Cochran to Vice-Consul Stevens, Urumia, April 27, 1903, RG 84, Vol. 2.

<sup>392</sup> Wigram and Wigram, *The Cradle of Mankind; Life in Eastern Kurdistan*, 188–89.



The Kurdish-Christian tribal fight would spiral out of control and would become an incident of much international significance precisely due to the ambiguities and the rivalry over the northern stretch of the Ottoman-Iranian frontier.

The Dasht Kurds' nominal allegiance to the formidable regional power magnate, Sheikh Mohammad Siddiq of Nawchia (1855-1907), also added to the anxieties of the Christians and their missionary patrons. Reflecting a change in the Ottoman authorities' attitude towards the frontier question after the creation of the Hamidiye to combat Armenian cross-border incursions, the sheikh had also resumed his efforts to regain control of his father's confiscated property in Mergawar and Tergawar. After Sheikh Ubeydullah's invasion of Iran in 1880, his son, Sheikh Siddiq, had immediately reached out to Iranian authorities to dissociate himself from his father's revolt by renewing his allegiance. Having placed his family under the protection of Ali Khan Shikak (who had also refused to heed Ubeydullah's call to arms), Sheikh Siddiq had asked the Amir-i Nizam for amnesty.<sup>393</sup> As a frontier lord, he was keenly aware of the constraints on his power so he tried to stay on good terms with government authorities on both sides of the frontier. Thus, while he was on the payroll of the Ottoman state, he also remained steadfast in his endeavors to win Iranian goodwill. The opportunity for a proactive move by the sheikh to reclaim his lands arose in the wake of Naser al-Din Shah's assassination in 1896. The sheikh tried his luck with the new monarch, Mozaffar al-Din Shah. In 1898, he wrote to Hasan Ali Khan Amir-i Nizam to demand restitution of his father's patrimony. The Amir reminded him sternly that he would attain no such rights.<sup>394</sup>

The impact of local inhabitants in the border demarcation process comes into focus through the expressed anxieties of Iranian authorities over the movements of

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<sup>393</sup> *Gozidah- i Asnad*, vol. 3, 599-600.

<sup>394</sup> *Gozidah- i Asnad*, vol. 4, 536.

Ubeydullah's sons. But such warnings did not stop the sheikh from trying to outbid the Iranian frontier officials. A year later in 1899, the purported report of the return of Sheikh Ubeydullah's eldest son, Sheikh Abdulkadir, from exile in the Hijaz sent shudders down the spine of the Urmia authorities who feared outbreak of additional troubles along the frontiers beside those created by the Shikak tribesmen under Mohammad Agha and his son, Jaffar.

Sheikh Siddiq's adamant pursuit of the restitution of his patrimony in Mergawar and Tergawar assumed a marked significance as his more assertive claims coincided with an aggressive Ottoman policy in the frontier disputes at the turn of the century.<sup>395</sup> In 1900, the sheikh made a new attempt at regaining his property by seeking to personally appear before Mozaffar al-Din Shah's entourage on his way to Europe through Azerbaijan. The *karguzar* of Urmia [agent of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs] issued a vehement warning against any official authorization of his entrance into Iran.<sup>396</sup> Nasrullah, the *karguzar* of Urmia, stated that in light of Sheikh Siddiq's past record of sedition, first, it was certain that he would not enter Iranian territory at the head of a small entourage. Second, the news of his entrance into Iran would be sufficient to create disturbances along the frontiers and throughout Kurdistan as his followers and his Shi'i adversaries were blood enemies. Third, the inhabitants of Urmia, he noted, had not forgotten the suffering they had been subjected to during the Sheikh Ubeydullah's invasion. Finally, his object in seeking an audience with the shah, he stated, was to

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<sup>395</sup> *Gozidah- i Asnad*, vol. 4, 536.

<sup>396</sup> *Karguzar* was an agent of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who was charged with facilitating, ordering, and controlling foreign activity in Iran. The office of *karguzari* developed early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a result of Iran's treaties with Russia and later Britain which called for a non-religious office to regulate the affairs of foreigners who were protected by capitulation rights. According to Morteza Nouraei, "The *kārgozāris* in the north tended toward a more political, diplomatic, and haphazard course, while those in the British-dominated south tended to be more commercially oriented and efficient." See the entry for *Kargozar* in *Encyclopedia Iranica* at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kargozar-19th-century-term>, accessed on April 22, 2018.

demand restoration of his father's estates in Iranian territory, something that would only jeopardize Iranian interests.<sup>397</sup> Besides his overtures to the Iranian authorities, the sheikh was even reported to have opened communications with the Russian consul in Tabriz in order to advance his object of repossessing his father's usurped lands.<sup>398</sup> Thus, when the Begzadeh Kurds fell out with their Nestorian neighbors in 1903, the conflict was doubly worrisome as Sheikh Siddiq's presence loomed larger than ever from across the border.

In 1903, when a Kurdish coalition of Bezadeh and Herki tribes (Ottoman subjects), who were perceived to be the allies of Sheikh Siddiq, mounted an attack on Balulan, the Nestorian villagers resisted and fought back. In the ensuing skirmish, a number of Kurds were killed and the body of one of the Kurdish assailants was burned by

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<sup>397</sup> *Gozidah- i Asnad*, vol. 4, 549.

<sup>398</sup> Captain Maunsell, the vice-consul of Van reported the following about Sheikh Siddiq's effort to meet the shah in order to restore his father's confiscated property: I have the honour to forward the following report regarding Sheikh Muhammad Sadik who lives in SHEMDINAN and is the son of Sheikh Obeidullah who invaded Persia in 1881. A short time ago the Sheikh expressed a desire to go and meet the Shah on his return from Europe to Teheran; and the idea was favourably entertained in Tabriz and in consequence the Sheikh made extensive preparations for the journey. The ostensible object of the visit was to obtain the restoration of certain villages in Tergavvar which the Persian Government confiscated from his father in consequence of his conduct in 1881. He was to meet the Shah either in Tabriz or at Julfa and 300 Kurds, well armed, each with new uniforms were assembled as escort, and a splendid tent made ready for the Shah's acceptance besides a sum of £7000 in gold for expenses of the road. The Turkish Government naturally disapproved strongly of this expedition; and sent Sheikh Hamid Pasha, an influential Kurdish sheikh of Bashkale, friendly to the Government, to endeavor to dissuade him from going. Sheikh Muhammad Sadik has two houses, one in Nehri in Shemsdinan, and another at Katuna on the Persian frontier; and he left the latter place about the 25th of Sept on his way with an imposing retinue. After a few days journey he was induced to return to Katuna where he now remains having given up his project. This result is stated by the Vali to be due to the strong representations of the Turkish Government and Sheikh Hamid Pasha but I have also heard that the Persian Governor of Tergavvar refused to permit him to pass saying that the blood of his father's victims still called out for vengeance and that he could not permit him to pass. I heard last spring and have recently conformed the new by a visit to Shemsdinan that the Sheikh wrote a letter to the Russian priests in Urmia asking for assistance and protection from Russia to which he received a favourable reply; and it is said that this visit to meet the Shah was also designed for the purpose of meeting Russian officials at Julfa or the Russian Consul at Tabriz. The Sheikh is by no means friendly to the Ottoman Government as evidenced by his attempt to strangle the Kaimamkam of Shemsdinan this summer and the fact that the present Kaimalam has asked to be relieved of his post. The sheikh has amassed a large fortune and is of a restless, intriguing, diplomatically combative disposition and may give further trouble now that his plans in Persia have been thwarted. See Maunsell to O'Connor, Van, no. 41, October 22, 1900, *Records of the Kurds*, Vol. 4, 74-75.

a Nestorian woman in retaliation for the Kurds' destruction of her cattle and stable. The Kurds had also been forced into retreat by a strong force of Nestorians from the nearby large village of Mawana. The timely dispatch of government reinforcements from Urmia guaranteed the Nestorians' successful resistance. Such a skirmish could have played out in the customary way as an intertribal blood feud with little regard for religious distinction of the combatants. The chiefs of Dasht, Kurdish and Nestorian included, had mixed Christian and Kurdish subjects and allies. For instance, Bedr Khan Beg of Dasht, Wigram reported, would take out "his Christian village to battle, as readily as his Kurdish one: and the village deacon is his second in command."<sup>399</sup> However, this regular intertribal conflict escalated into a fresh episode of Kurdish-Nestorian sectarian war when the Qajar crown prince, Mohammad Ali Mirza, lent his unequivocal support to the Kurds.

Mohammad Ali Mirza, the ambitious heir apparent in Tabriz, harbored personal grudges against the Afshar khans of Urmia, especially against Majd al-Saltaneh, the deputy governor and Salar al-Dowleh, the governor. Both of these Afshar landlords were among the wealthy proprietors, who owned numerous Muslim and Nestorian villages. They were also staunch advocates of the American and Anglican missionary enterprises. The alliance between the Afshar khans and the missionaries dated back to the establishment of the American mission in the 1830s, when the reform-minded Prince Malek Kasim Mirza had vigorously supported the expansion of the missionaries' educational institutions. The American mission's policy of winning over the support of high-ranking officials had encouraged the missionaries to cultivate friendly relations with these Afshar khans. They were in possession of most of the Nestorian villages across the Urmia plains and in the Kurdish mountain valleys, thus the relationship was mutually

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<sup>399</sup> Wigram and Wigram, *The Cradle of Mankind*, 190.

beneficial. The Afshar khans reciprocated the missionaries' friendly attitude as they could leverage the missionaries' political representations on behalf of their Christian tenants to their advantage against both Kurdish raids and state encroachments on their property rights.

This amicable relation between the Afshar khans and the foreign missionaries, which furthered the interests of the Nestorian villagers and their Afshar landlords such as Majd al-Saltaneh and Salar al-Dowleh (alias Salar-i Afkham), was resented by certain sectors of the Urmia elite. Among these, the *ulama* led the list. The latter were particularly irked by the deputy governor Majd al-Saltaneh's vociferous calls for reforms. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Majd al-Saltaneh, a pro-reform khan, was extolled by the missionaries as a courageous yet indiscreet official who had publicly made provocative statements against local religious authorities. He had gone so far in his advocacy of reforms to have openly flouted the authority of the powerful religious elite of Urmia. It was well known that Majd al-Saltaneh had publicly stated that reforms could hardly be enforced unless the shah first hanged a few *mullahs*. He was also quoted to have boasted of tearing a letter from one of the leading mujtahids resident in Kerbala, a holy shrine city in the vicinity of Baghdad. In reaction, the *ulama* had lodged complaints against him with Mohammad Ali Mirza.<sup>400</sup>

This contest between a reformist khan and a number of the *ulama*, indicative of divergent reform visions for Iran on the verge of the Constitutional Revolution, had presented an opportunity to the ambitious *valiahd* (crown prince) to augment his power by wresting control of the rich agricultural districts of Urmia from the Afshar khans. The Kurdish-Nestorian intertribal conflict in Tergawar and Mergawar, districts owned by

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<sup>400</sup> Parry to Stevens, Urumia, no. 4, June 8, 1903, (FO 248/792).

Salar and Majd, and the religious elites' disgruntlement against the Urmia authorities, presented the opportune moment. Thus, in 1903, on his way from Tabriz to Urmia, the *valiahd*, ahead of his retinue, dispatched orders to extort and exile Majd al-Saltaneh.

The arrival of the *valiahd* in Urmia in May 1903, as part of an attempt to increase his personal wealth, inadvertently led to further unravelling of fragile inter-communal relations among the inhabitants of the region. In order to dispossess Salar al-Dowleh from his villages in Tergawar, he weighed his support on the side of the Begzadeh Kurds of Dasht. Mohammad Ali Mirza's backing of frontier tribes, which would prove crucial sources of support during his tenure as shah, seemed to have been the mainstay of his policy as the heir apparent of the Qajar monarchy. The *valiahd* may have also been inspired by the example of Sultan Abdülhamid II to bind the Kurds to his person in the form of the Hamidiye regiments.

Emboldened by the investiture of such royal prerogative, the chiefs of Dasht unleashed their wrath on the Christian villages, burning and plundering Balulan, Shebani, Hakki, and Dostulan villages. The governor of Urmia, who was alarmed by the crown prince's humiliation of Majd al-Saltaneh, sought to ingratiate himself with Mohammad Ali Mirza. He demonstrated his loyalty by dispatching a small expeditionary force to aid the Kurds against his own Nestorian tenants. This sudden turn of events shocked the Nestorians of the frontier districts and their American, Anglican, French, and Russian protectors as a series of more unsettling rumors gained currency. Word spread that Sheikh Siddiq of Nawchia was also gathering a force to punish the Herki tribe, but it was interpreted as a ruse by the sheikh to cross the border to retake possession of his confiscated property through aiding the Kurds.<sup>401</sup>

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<sup>401</sup> Cochran to Stevens, Urumia, May 30, 1903, (FO 248/792).

Meanwhile, the Kurdish chiefs, heartened by the experience of the Hamidiye regiments, dispatched letters to Istanbul in order to enlist the sultan's support against their Nestorian foes. With the Porte's recent atrocities against the Armenians of Van, in which the Hamidiye Cavalry Corps had taken part, the Iranian Kurdish tribes of the frontier could anticipate receiving imperial support in overawing their Christian neighbors. The Begzadeh chiefs of Dasht complained to the sultan that the Nestorians had desecrated mosques and Muslim corpses by incinerating them. Similar letters were addressed to the *ulama* of Urmia and Karbala, which were also received sympathetically. If the missionaries accounts are to be trusted, both the sultan and the *ulama* of the holy shrines cities of Ottoman Iraq, in correspondence with Sheikh Siddiq and Mirza Hussein Agha, the chief *mujtahid* of Urmia, issued *fatwas*, declaring the "extermination" of the Christians to be lawful. The *mujtahids*, purportedly, resented the Christians for having become the agents of Russian intervention in Iran.<sup>402</sup>

Pursuant to such Kurdish and clerical propaganda, the anti-Christian and anti-foreigner sentiments among the Shi'i inhabitants of the city assumed a more threatening character, preventing Salar al-Dowleh from sending reinforcements to the Nestorians as he was already being widely criticized for favoring Christians against Muslims.<sup>403</sup> The *ulamas'* calls to *jihād* and the popular demonstration of resentment towards Salar al-Dowleh for being disloyal to Islam and favorable towards foreigners in Urmia reflected the larger developments that played out on a national scale across the Iranian and Ottoman domains. In the years leading up to the Constitutional Revolutions in Iran and the Ottoman Empire, intellectuals and clerics appealed to Islam as one of the most potent

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<sup>402</sup> Cochran to Stevens, Urumia, May 30, 1903, (FO 248/792).

<sup>403</sup> Parry to Stevens, Urumia, June 6, 1903, (FO 248/792).

symbols around which to organize resistance against foreign domination.<sup>404</sup> Throughout the constitutional period (1906-1911), both the religious and secular minded activists, journalists, merchants, khans, and even the shah invoked Islam and protection of Muslims against ‘foreign infidels,’ domestic ‘heretics,’ and ‘deviant Babis.’ In order to stave off Muslim suspicion of their loyalty and political orientation, even the Christian merchants had to first declare their abidance by the *sharia* ban on selling or consuming alcohol as proof of their patriotism and valuable members of the emerging Iranian nation.<sup>405</sup>

The Kurds’ renewed hostilities in Mergawar and Tergawar against their Nestorian neighbors at the urging of the *valiahd*, resulted in the burning of twelve Nestorians in Shebani village, a total of eighteen Christians killed, the desertion of several villages, and the creation of a refugee crisis. The displaced Christians took refuge with their brethren in Mawana, the largest Christian village in Tergawar. Sheikh Siddiq also took advantage of the chaos to send two hundred men to the aid of the Dasht Kurds in their fight. The sheikh was especially motivated to avenge himself on the Iranian authorities of Urmia who had confiscated some of his tobacco produce.<sup>406</sup> This caused a widespread panic among the Nestorians of the mountains elsewhere beyond Tergawar, prompting them to pack up their belongings and run for the safety of the Russian, American, and English mission compounds in and around Urmia city. Anglican Missionary Parry described the

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<sup>404</sup> Cochran to Vice-Consul Stevens, Urumia, June 1, 1903, FO 248/792.

<sup>405</sup> For instance, a merchant, by the name of Masrub Masihi, published a complaint in the *Anjuman* journal of Tabriz on October 23, 1907, in which he mentioned that he was known for his good reputation among his Muslim neighbors and colleagues for abstaining from alcohol but even so he was barred from obtaining sufficient supplies of grapes and wheat for his family on account of the ban on the Armenian district of Tabriz. Apparently, the Armenian quarter of Tabriz were given only a designated amount of grapes and wheat so as to prevent them from producing alcohol. Masrub Masihi made a point of specifying his identity as a Protestant Christian from the Tegawar district whom he described as national heroes for their participation in the defense of the homeland against the “blood-sucking Ottomans and the savage race of Kurds”. See *Ruznamah-yi Anjuman-I Tabriz*, 574.

<sup>406</sup> Nizam al-Dowleh to Foreign Ministry, 1322 H.Q. [1904], *Guzinah-yi Asnad*, Vol. 5, 556.



situation as one filled with anxiety among both Christians and Muslims as crowds of the mountain Nestorian refugees poured into the city. He noted that when the Nestorian refugees congregated in front of the English mission compound for prayer, the Muslims were quick to shut down their shops, fearing imminent disturbances and plunder of the Muslim quarter by the Nestorian mountaineers, who were indistinguishable from Kurds in their clothing.<sup>407</sup>

Inside the city walls, the Nestorians along with the Shi'i inhabitants remained agitated, while Kurdish raids continued relentlessly on the hills west of the city, where the besieged overcrowded village of Mawana held out against a coalition of the Begzadeh Kurds of Dasht and the Herki tribes. At the same time, the Muslim residents of Urmia, receptive to a general national awakening in Iran, were especially enraged by Russia's encroachment on Azerbaijan and were beginning to see the Christians as agents of Russian imperialism. Moreover, the Belgian Customs Officials' vigorous measures at tax collection in the province of Azerbaijan to meet the shah's exorbitant foreign debts fueled this resentment further as the *ualma* made public appeals to the sentiments of the Muslim inhabitants to rise in defense of Islam.

Amidst the agitations, the ambitious *valiahd*, Mohammad Ali Mirza, strove to exploit the situation to his benefit. On one hand, in some sense emulating the Hamidian policy of creating a personal bond with Kurdish *ashirets*, Mohammad Ali Mirza strengthened his personal power by forging alliances with the frontier tribes of the province, including those of the Shahseven in Ardebil, the Karachadaghis under the notorious Rahim Khan, and the Kurds of Salmas, Dasht, and Savujbulagh.<sup>408</sup> On the other hand, he rode the popular tide created by the clergy's vociferous calls for expelling the

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<sup>407</sup> Parry to Vice-Consul Stevens, Urumia, June 8, 1903, FO 248/792, No. 4.

<sup>408</sup> Vice-Consul Stevens to Grant-Duff, Tabriz, June 25, 1903, FO 248/792.

Belgian Customs officials to curb the potential danger they posed to his authority and sources of revenue. As such, the traditional dynamic of collaboration between select religious and state authorities was reactivated in the local context of Azerbaijan as both interest groups feared that the Belgian Customs officials' tax collection efforts would block their traditional channels of accumulating wealth through corrupt practices.

The *ulama* were especially motivated in their opposition as the prospect of Christian officials' taxation authority extending to such items as meat and produce would hack away at the very core of their standing within the Muslim community. Here, the cultural, economic, and political spheres merged as the clergy reasserted their power over regulation of their flocks' dietary habits. With their traditional approaches to the position of religion within society running counter to the novelties of governance introduced by foreigners and secular revolutionaries and merchants, the clergy became ever more active in the political sphere to shore up support for their declining influence. Their leadership of the brewing popular opposition would become a rehearsal for the outburst of revolutionary fervor in the form of the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. During the revolution (1906-1911), some of the clergy would temporarily forge an alliance with the emerging secular activists of the Iranian society on the principle of countering despotism and foreign intervention in Iran's national affairs. Yet, reflecting the contingent nature of such alliance, this coalition would break down as soon as debates over the nature of laws and governance would become the focus of national debates. The new shah, Mohammad Ali, would try to exploit the rift in the alliance to revitalize his diminished sources of power. These conflicting processes on the national level played out in a much more contentious fashion in the local context of Urmia as they became entangled with the Ottoman-Iranian frontier disputes. In Urmia, elite rivalries between Sunni tribal chiefs, Shi'i khans, and clerics and later socialist revolutionaries from the Caucasus became

intertwined with intertribal feuds involving foreign missionaries and the larger imperial frontier security concerns, all of which converged to invest communal identities with an unstable and tentative sectarian character as the revolutionary struggle experienced ebbs and flows.

In 1903 in Urmia, the bazaar was alive with rumors that the Russians were wresting control of the country, as the clergy railed against the prospect of foreign unbelievers' subjugation of the Muslim world and Iran in particular. While anti-foreign tirades streamed from the pulpits of mosques, in the bazaars, fatal threats floated around against the Russian vice-consul and prominent Russian Muslim protégés such as Hassan Agha Tajir Bashi. In one instance, the women of a village owned by Hassan Agha staged a protest to dislodge the landlord. Their immediate resentment against the Tajir Bashi's exploitation of their labor found expression in condemning the landlords' association with the hated Russian consuls.<sup>409</sup>

Attesting to the unmistakable rise in the power of the clergy over the Shi'i residents of Urmia in the period leading up to the revolution, Mirza Hussein Agha's involvement in the Nestorian-Kurdish affair is instructive. As the chief *mujtahid* of Urmia, Mirza Hussein Agha came out in full support of the Kurdish raids against the Nestorian Christians of Tergawar. He had become a leading figure in the incessant public meetings held to address the crisis of an impending Russian occupation. The Russians had just established a mission in 1898, in the wake of which the majority of the Nestorians of the region had transferred their allegiance to the Russian Orthodox Church. The overt and enthusiastic reception of the Russian Orthodox bishops by the Nestorians in 1898 had immediately provoked a response from the suspicious Muslims Urmia.

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<sup>409</sup> Parry to Steven, Urmi, June 13, 1903, (FO 248/792), 53-56.

Notably, in the same year, the English mission was targeted by the Kurds of Dasht, who attacked the mission, killing a servant. The culprit was a Begzadeh chief who not only escaped prosecution at the hands of the authorities but was purportedly even awarded by the governor of Urmia in recognition of his service.<sup>410</sup> With the establishment of the Russian mission, which was yet another addition to the American, French, and English missions, the Christians could and did expect a marked improvement in their political standing with the Russian consul to back missionary representations on their behalf. Such turnabout in the communal connection of the Nestorians with a foreign power most resented for its commercial and political dominance over the affairs of the province was bound to cause a backlash from the Muslim community that felt increasingly burdened by diminished financial opportunities and an endemic corruption among Qajar officials. It was against this background that the sizeable wealth accumulated by personalities such as Hassan Agha Tajir Bashi, Salar al-Dowleh, and Majd al-Saltaneh in association with foreign consuls and missionaries was becoming the focus of the popular opposition led by the conservative clergy in the local context of Urmia.

Parallel to the menace posed by foreign domination, certain clerics, such as Mirza Hussein Agha, feared losing their privileged status to an emergent middle class of merchants and literati, who favored secular ideas infiltrating the country from the Caucasus and Istanbul. Such ideas alarmed the conservative clerics as advocacy of secular laws undercut the conservative clergies' established position as the guardians of the Shi'i community and intermediaries within the Qajar monarchy. Additionally, for the *ulama*, secular ideas were associated with the European great powers that were essentially Christian and generally made representations on behalf of Iranian and

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<sup>410</sup> Coakley, *The Church of the East and the Church of England*, 228.

Ottoman Christians. The heavy presence of foreign missionaries in Urmia presented intimate, visual proof of the western powers' arrogance in asserting moral superiority. The fact that the missions' medical facilities and the printing presses, bold symbols of the novelties of a flaunted European civilization, had greatly discredited traditional healing practices and rituals galled the Muslim clergy.

A biased but keen observer of the events in Urmia, Anglican missionary Parry suggested that "while there is a general feeling that the power is slipping out of the hands of Sayyids and Mollahs, yet the hostility is rather against the increased prosperity of the Christians and especially the danger of Russian domination. At the same time, I believe the non-religious Moslems would favour the Russians."<sup>411</sup> In 1903, the city of Urmia was a melting pot of emergent classes and ideas, which threatened to loosen the hold of traditional authority. Meanwhile, a general anti-Russian feeling hung in the air, creating a common cause between the secular and the clerical sectors. Since the establishment of the Orthodox mission in 1899, Russian grip on the city had tightened more than ever. Thus, the Kurdish raid against the Nestorians of Tergawar, the majority of whom had transferred their allegiance to the Orthodox Church, was perceived in this light as Muslim popular resistance against Russian dominance. "I think all this explains why stronger measures are not taken against the Kurds," Parry surmised.<sup>412</sup>

Continued Kurdish hostilities were not, however, desired by the Shi'i *ulama* of Urmia as they were concerned that the Russians might be provoked to intervene directly by occupying Urmia. Also, according to Parry, the clergy of Urmia were aware that the removal of the Christian buffer zone between the Kurds of Dasht and Urmia was not ideal. After all, the Shi'i Azeris of Urmia were conscious that "there is great danger to

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<sup>411</sup> Parry to Vice-Consul Stevens, Urumia, June 13, 1903, FO 248/792, 53.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid.

life and property in allowing a free hand to the Kurds, who hate the Urumi Shiah more than the Xtians [Christians].”<sup>413</sup> Therefore, through Mirza Hussein Agha’s mediation, Fath-i Sultan, the *valiahd*’s representative, convinced the Kurdish chiefs of Dasht to agree to a settlement. As part of the conflict resolution process, the *mujtahid* insisted that the Nestorians would not ask for any redress on the grounds that both sides had suffered and the prosecution of the matter would only create more problems. Pointing to the unjust course of the negotiations, Parry complained that it was not a sensible settlement on the part of the *mujtahid* as further disturbances by the Kurds could only lead to Russia’s more aggressive involvement in the affairs of the region. The Nestorians were anything but happy with the settlement and proposed to migrate to the Russian Caucasus. For the Nestorians, the agreement implied that they would no longer enjoy government support. In fact, they had been practically abandoned to the mercy of the Kurds. Fath-i Sultan, having received a personal gift of 1000 tumans, rewarded the chiefs of the two communities, Nestorian and Kurdish, with robes of honor, affirming the restoration of the old order of things. But as Parry correctly suggested, it was anything but a viable resolution as the Kurds saw in the whole affair an official license for unbridled hostilities against their Nestorian neighbors. If anything, the old order of things had come crashing down.<sup>414</sup>

By this point, it was clear that the conflict was viewed and actively framed as a sectarian war. The Kurds of Dasht, supported by the *valiahd* and the Shi’i *ulama*, had also called on the sultan for help. With the advent of the Russian Orthodox mission, the American missionaries’ presence could no longer be said to remain confined to the realm of culture and education. As Ussama Makdisi has argued about Mount Lebanon, the

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<sup>413</sup> Ibid.

<sup>414</sup> Parry to Stevens, Urumia, June 28, 1903, (FO 248/792), 53.

missionaries' cumulative presence in the region had gradually led to the "carving out of spheres of cultural influence," which had in turn sectarianized the district. The missionaries, Makdisi argued, did not produce sectarianism per se, but by presenting a starkly different model of communal development than that offered by the Ottoman and the Qajar presents, sectarianism was born.<sup>415</sup> The Ottoman and Qajar presents were inherently and rigidly Islamic and needed to be transcended for any development or modernization to take place. That may not have necessarily led to conflict but since the American missionaries became bolder in their representational efforts in rivalry with those of the Russian and the Catholic missions, their cultural and instructional presence assumed a more political character. After all, it was a common belief among both Muslims and the foreigner that Russian occupation was impending and it was just a matter of time.<sup>416</sup>

Moreover, the framing of the conflict in sectarian terms as a *jihad* or a crusade against Islam and the Christian refugees' decision and invitation to take shelter at the mission and the Russian consulate compounds did not simply suggest the local inhabitants' vulnerability to imperial exploitation. Rather such developments pointed to the radical transformation of communal boundaries and visions in which the locals took as much part in forging as the missionaries and the imperial powers. The locals, by dint of their lack of access to knowledge production and dissemination, were of course at a disadvantage. But the sectarian hostilities were not simply transplants from some external source. The Kurds of Dasht actively called on the sultan for help. In light of this, it can be argued that the Kurdish and Nestorian tribes of Tergawar no longer waged an intertribal

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<sup>415</sup> Makdisi, "Fantasies of the Possible," 120.

<sup>416</sup> S. G. Wilson, "The Russian Occupation of Northern Persia," *The Muslim World* 3, no. 4 (October 1, 1913): 339–49.

feud; they were fighting a religious war as a Sunni community beholden to the Ottoman sultan-caliph against a Christian one protected by the Tsar and the Queen of England. The missionaries' and the clergy's attempts at framing the conflict in such explicit religious terms made a great contribution to delineating more pronounced sectarian boundaries.

#### **THE ASSASSINATION OF BENJAMIN LABAREE AND ITS RAMIFICATIONS:**

While the Kurdish raids had created a Nestorian refugee crisis and the clergy-led agitations over the Belgian customs officials' involvement in tax-collection continued with the indirect support of the crown prince, another violent episode in Urmia shook the foreign communities. On September 9, 1903, a Nestorian-British subject by the name of Mushi G. David was murdered by Sayyid Mir Ghaffar. The *sayyid* had come to the notice of the British consul at Tabriz for his recent attempts at subjection of the Nestorian Christians to extortions. When he encountered no opposition from the authorities, Mir Ghaffar upped the ante and shot dead David upon the victim's refusal to give up his watch. The incident drew a lot of attention in Urmia and Tabriz as it was well-known that the Nestorian was a British subject. Amidst the popular agitations against foreign domination, this incident was viewed by Muslims as an act of resistance. British vice-consul Hilde Stevens called for immediate punishment of the murderer both to save British prestige among Muslims and to re-assert British position in Urmia, which had gradually been dislodged by Russia's unilateral management of affairs in the district.<sup>417</sup>

British consul-general Albert Charles Wratislaw pressed the matter with the *valiahd*, calling his attention to the takeover of Urmia by the clergy. An unsympathetic *valiahd*, who had found a convenient alliance in a sector of the conservative clergy to

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<sup>417</sup> Stevens to Grant-Duff, Tabriz, December 23, 1903, FO 248/792, 125.



disempower the Afshar landlords of Urmia, responded by effusive promises and lukewarm measures. Relentless pressure from the British consul eventually led to the launching of an investigation. However, the only outcome of the investigation was the torching of a number of houses in the *sayyid*'s village by soldiers dispatched for arrest the culprit.<sup>418</sup>

The situation became more complicated, in early 1904, as Russia's plans to build the Julfa-Tabriz railroad got underway. It looked to the inhabitants of Azerbaijan that the nightmare of a Russian occupation of the province was nothing short of imminent. The chief *mujtahid* of Tabriz, who had come out against the plan, had been warned by the Russian authorities to back off or risk being held responsible for any anti-Russian demonstrations. The inhabitants of Azerbaijan seethed with rage in the face of such egregious encroachments by Russian officials. It was amidst this somber atmosphere of mistrust and resentment against outsiders that shocking news once again struck at the heart of Azerbaijan's community of foreigners. On March 9, 1904, a senior American missionary and his servant, on their way back to Urmia from Khoi, were intercepted midway in Salmas and murdered in cold blood. The evidence gathered from the murder scene indicated that it was an act of vengeance as the body of Rev. Benjamin Labaree had received multiple dagger wounds. His mouth, cut open up to the ear, attested to deliberate attempts on the part of the victims to send a threatening message to the American colony. And just as intended, the ghastly scene of the naked body of a senior missionary, studded with dagger wounds, sent shivers down the spines of the Americans in Urmia and Tabriz.<sup>419</sup>

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<sup>418</sup> Stevens to Grant-Duff, Tabriz, February 2, 1903, no.3, (FO 248/792).

<sup>419</sup> Cochran to Wratislaw, Urumia, May 7, 1904, (FO 248/823).

Through Majd al-Saltaneh's efforts (who had returned from exile), soon evidence emerged that the outlaw *sayyid*, Mir Ghaffar, who had been wanted for murder of the British subject, Mushi Daniel, was implicated in the murder of Rev. Labaree. He had taken refuge with the chiefs of Dasht, who had purportedly taken part in the assassination to get back at the American Dr. Cochran for his complaints to the government on behalf of the Nestorian victims of Tergawar.<sup>420</sup> The independent investigation conducted by Majd al-Saltaneh and the missionaries, aided by the Nestorians of Tergawar, gradually led to the discovery of the belongings of the victim, vindicating their initial suspicions. Yet, the government authorities of Urmia's hands were tied as the *valiahd* was adamant in his efforts to exculpate the Dasht Kurds and to block the efforts to send an expedition against them. The presence of Mirza Hussein Agha in Urmia, as the staunch supporter of Sayyid Mir Ghaffar and the Kurds, also heartened the culprits in their refusal to stand trial. Using scare tactics, the Kurds of Dasht went so far as to fire a volley of shots on the British Consul from Kermanshah, who had come on a special mission to conduct the investigations. When the consul pressed the governor, Nizam al-Dowleh, to punish the villagers of Dizza for harboring the snipers, Mirza Hussein Agha stepped up in their defense, and started agitating public opinion against foreigners.<sup>421</sup> Gough believed that without the *valiahd*'s greenlight to the governor, nothing could be done and his continued sojourn in Urmia would only damage British prestige, hence the advisability of his return to his post in Kermanshah.

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<sup>420</sup> According to the missionary accounts, Dr. Joseph Cochran had been the target of the assassination, but, by mistake, Benjamin Labaree had been killed. Cochran was supposed to have accompanied the female American missionaries to the Russian Caucasus on their way back to the United States. But due to preoccupation, Labaree had decided to cover for Dr. Cochran. As the head of the American mission in Urmia, it was well-known to the Kurds of Dasht that he had made representations on behalf of the Nestorian victims of the recent raids.

<sup>421</sup> Gough to Grant-Duff, Urmia, December 13, 1904, (FO 248/823).

Following sustained diplomatic pressure from the British representatives backed up by the American minister's stern warnings, the *valiahd* finally consented to the arrest of the *sayyid* and a number of the Kurdish Begzadeh chiefs. In December 1904, American Consul of Harpoot in Turkey, Dr. Norton, also arrived in Urmia to aid the prosecution process. In the same month, the *valiahd* was compelled to send his commissioner, Fath-i Sultan, the same official who had been appointed in the previous year to make peace between the conflicting Kurdish and Nestorian tribes of Tergawar. Fath-i Sultan, whom the British consul thought was the worst choice and could even be held indirectly responsible for the murder of Rev. Labaree on account of his appeasement of the Kurds in 1903, ignored the British and American consuls initially, instead calling on Mirza Hussein Agha and the Russian vice-consul in Urmia, M. Michailoff. Captain Gough and his American colleague, Dr. Norton of Harpoot, were irate at such a show of disrespect as the case, they thought, had nothing to do with the Russians.<sup>422</sup> However, the Russians were certainly more involved in the affairs of the province and had increasingly taken charge of the Nestorian communities of the region, a powerful position that made their involvement inevitable.

In January 1905, Mir Ghaffar and a number of Kurdish chiefs, including Gurgin Beg (alias Kurdu Beg) and Tellu Beg, Tamar Beg, Ali Khan, and Mirza Kadir were detained by stratagem and transferred to Tabriz where they were held as hostages to ensure the good conduct of their tribesmen in Dasht. It seems like, Mirza Hussein Agha, personally feeling the heat from the British and American officials' pressure on the *valiahd*, had induced the Kurdish chiefs' surrender.<sup>423</sup> The American missionaries, with a

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<sup>422</sup> Gough to Grant-Duff, Urmia, December 19, 1904, (FO 248/823).

<sup>423</sup> Gough to Hardinge, Urumiah, January 25, 1905, (FO 248/851). Mirza Hussein Agha apparently sent a *sayyid* to Captain Gough's Persian Mirza in order to inform the British consul of his own contribution to the arrest of the Kurdish chiefs. Mirza Hussein Agha was probably trying to avoid his own impending exile by patching up his relations with the British and the American missionaries.

view to their security of life and property and as a deterrent against future aggressive attempts, pressed charges and demanded their government ought to pressure the Iranian authorities to send an expeditionary force against the Kurds. Meanwhile, Dr. Cochran of the American mission was also hesitant and thought it might be prudent to return Mirza Hussein Agha's friendly overtures so as to neutralize the possibility of his resort to revengeful tactics in case of facing exile.<sup>424</sup> The request for Mirza Hussein Agha's exile along with the replacement of the governor remained on their agenda, however. It turned out that Mirza Hussein Agha was shortly after "invited by the *valiahd* to go on pilgrimage to Meshed [the shrine city of Mashhad in the province of Khorasan]."<sup>425</sup> The British and the Americans also recommended that the prisoners be transferred to Tehran in order to guarantee their inability to escape through the *valiahd*'s machinations.

The Begzadeh tribes of Dasht retaliated against the rigorous British action by making open threats that they would come down from the mountains and kill any foreigner that could get their hands on. They also sent messages that they were intending to arrest a foreigner and hold him hostage in return for the safety of the arrested party of chiefs in Tabriz. Dr. Cochran's situation was particularly vulnerable as he was the mission head and resided on the hospital and college premises outside the city walls. A recent attempt by the Begzadeh Kurds to break into Dr. Cochran's house had created an atmosphere of intense fear. As Captain Gough suggested, while the British and Americans had a high-ranking chief such as Gurgin Beg in their hands, the Kurds also held "just as good a trump card in their ability to murder one of the missionaries practically any time they wished."<sup>426</sup> Facing such an impasse, Gough maintained that the

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<sup>424</sup> Ibid.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid.

<sup>426</sup> Gough to Hardinge, Urmiah, January 10, 1905, (FO 248/851).

only practical option was for the Qajar government to send an expedition against the Begzadeh tribes.

To make the matters more complicated for the British officials and the American missionaries on the ground, in a diplomatic miscalculation, upon receiving the demanded indemnity, the American Minister, Richmond Pearson, had declared the case closed in the form of a public telegraphic message. This uncoordinated move outraged those foreigners closely involved in the affair, as they were concerned that such a measure merely attested to the failure of the British and American governments in punishing the culprits as a deterrent against similar future incidents.<sup>427</sup>

Meanwhile, the *valiahd* remained steadfast in protecting the Kurds with the double objective of acquiring the rich lands of Urmia and securing the loyalty of the Kurdish tribes whom he could rely on as personal guards on the model of the Hamidiye regiments in the Ottoman Empire. In an egregious act of injustice, he arrested two servants of Majd al-Saltaneh and coerced a false confession from them as the murderers of Labaree. In order to further break the power of the Afshar khans of Urmia, he also stripped Salar al-Dowleh and Majd al-Saltaneh of their official ranks and extorted from them the \$50,000 indemnity sum demanded by the United States' government. To legitimize his efforts, he also sought to pin the blame on the Shikak tribes of Salmas under Jaffar Agha, who had flouted his authority.

In light of the *valiahd*'s fierce opposition to any resolution of the case that involved the punishment of the Kurds, Dr. Norton went to Tabriz for an audience with the *valiahd*, who made numerous promises for a speedy resolution of the case.<sup>428</sup> The

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<sup>427</sup> Albert Charles Wratishaw, *A Consul in the East* (London: Blackwood & Sons, 1924), 200-208.

<sup>428</sup> Norton to Pearson, Tabriz, January 28, 1905, (FO 248/823). The *valiahd* promised to send an expedition against the Kurds in the following week; to ask the governor of Urmia to arrest the rest of the murderers of Labaree; to establish a strong cavalry force in Urmia; to install a sub-governor in Dasht to enforce good behavior of Kurds and finally to transfer the imprisoned Kurds to Tehran.

immediate reaction to such news was that Mir Haj Beg, the most senior and influential of the Begzadeh Kurds, sent messages to the four main chiefs of the Somai Shikak tribal confederation, pleading with them to agree to make a joint representation to the *valiahd*, “pointing out to him that the measures being pressed against the Begzades are the result of a “jihad” and whether the crown prince would tolerate that.”<sup>429</sup> Amar Agha of the Shikak wavered in his response, stating that he would sanction any decision taken in unison. Mustafa Agha, who had been proclaimed the paramount chief of the Shikaks in return for his assistance to the government in its expedition against Jaffar Agha Shikak of Chahriq, definitively turned down Mir Haj Beg’s plea. Mir Haj Beg presented the case to the Shikaks as a religious crusade against them. He argued that the Christians of Tergawar and the American missionaries were retaliating against them for their services to the Iranian government in eliminating three or four Armenian revolutionists. The Begzadeh chief warned that if the *valiahd* was not ready to administer justice by remedying the situation in their interest, they would have to either leave the country or take matters into their own hands. Having gotten nowhere with the pro-Iranian Shikak chiefs, Mir haj Beg turned to Sheikh Siddiq with a similar request but nothing came of his efforts at the end.

Quoting Parry, the Anglican mission head in Urmia, Norton wrote that “the situation is readily becoming more critical, and that any relaxation of the demand for the full punishment of the remaining criminals, and for the complete submission of the tribe to the power of the government, would be attended by the most serious, and deplorable results for both the foreign colonies at Urumia, and the Christian villages in the adjacent region.”<sup>430</sup> Having warned Ehtesab al-Mulk, the shah’s special commissioner against

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<sup>429</sup> Gough to Hardinge, Urmiah, January 31, 1905, (FO 248/823).

<sup>430</sup> Norton to Pearson, Tabriz, February 9, 1905, (FO 248/823), 2-3.

possible international difficulties, Norton asserted that it was imperative that he take prompt action both as “a simple act of justice and international comity” and as “a deterrent against future crime.” Unless the government authorities in Tehran took immediate measures, Norton warned, “there are threatening indications that it [the Iranian government] may have to face a Kurdish coalition, comparable in its dangerous possibilities, to that of Sheikh Obeidullah in 1880.”<sup>431</sup>

As suggested by the content of the exchanges between the Begzadeh chiefs, the American and British missionaries and officials, and the Iranian authorities concerning the murder of Rev. Labaree, the conflict was as much to do with the divergent visions of community, the justice system, and the socio-political considerations that made up the dynamics of state and tribe on the contested Ottoman-Qajar frontiers. The American and British parties sought justice in a manner than ran counter in every sense to the way the tribes and state officials conceived of the concept. Following the murder, the Begzadeh Kurds opened the lines of communication with the American missionaries and sent out peace feelers. However, these friendly overtures were totally overlooked in favor of a militant attitude that sought to punish every member who had participated or was believed to have been somehow involved in the murder. In other words, for the murder of an American citizen, as the murders of his servant or that of the British-Canadian Mushi Daniel, were rarely mentioned as an outstanding issue, the whole Kurdish tribe was viewed and treated as criminals and liable to prosecution. At some point, consul Wratislaw went so far as to say that “there will be no peace for the frontier till the Kurds are exterminated.”<sup>432</sup> Mirza Hussein Agha, who sought to fulfil the traditional function of a religious arbiter of conflict, was forced into exile, and the governor was replaced. The

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<sup>431</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>432</sup> Wratislaw to Cecil-Springs, Tabriz, January 10, 1907, (FO 248/913), 106.

hegemonic power of foreigners was on full display. Nothing short of the full punishment of the tribes was to satisfy the community of foreigners as American and British systems of justice were stretched to match such imperial considerations as maintaining British and American prestige in the eyes of the natives. The missionaries, panicked by what had happened to the Armenians at the hands of the Kurdish tribes across the borders, were ready to see and portray the conflict between the Kurds and the Nestorians in sectarian terms in order to justify their demand for the firm punishment of the accused Kurdish tribes.

In their own turn, the Kurds, organized tribally as autonomous entities, but feeling the sting of state encroachments of their frontier territories, strove to maintain their precarious position by resisting complete settlement and submission to the will of the centralizing states. In light of Sultan Andülhamid II's pan-Islamic policies of favoring Kurdish tribes, the most favorable opportunity available to them seemed to be uniting under the banner of Islam, which was being promoted as a call for resistance against foreign dominance on the imperial level in both Iran and the Ottoman Empire and against Armenian incursions in the local context of East Anatolia. The continued and strengthened position of the foreign missions in their representations to the authorities on behalf of the Nestorians had picked up vigor after the advent of the Russian mission, unsettling the traditional intertribal dynamic in the mountains. After his ignominious arrest, the noted Kurdish chief Gurgin Beg (alias Kurdu Beg) would no longer seek to make alliances with some Nestorians against others in his skirmishes with other hostile Kurdish tribes. The Nestorians would also keep aloof as the two tribal communities viewed each other as distinctly Muslim and Christian communities and they would be waging sectarian wars henceforth.



Amidst these rumors and displays of fierce resistance on the part of the *valiahd* to do the British bidding, Majd al-Saltaneh asked Captain Gough if he could place his property in Urmia under the protection of the Imperial Bank of Persia, so he could make his escape across the border into the Russian Caucasus where his family had already fled.<sup>433</sup> However, before he could follow in the footsteps of Nizam al-Dowleh (who was removed by the *valiahd* from the governorship of Urmia in 1904 and extorted on account of the indemnity for the Labaree case) in transferring his property to the Russian bank to escape the *valiahd*'s extortions, Majd al-Saltaneh was fined and put under house arrest in Tabriz.<sup>434</sup> Similarly, Mirza Hussein Agha was also finally expelled from town on the orders of the *valiahd* even as he made vehement threats that he would start a riot. Apparently, Mirza Hussein Agha had managed to secure the Russian vice-consul's protection but the governor did not heed the Russian consul's representations on behalf of the *mujtahid* when express orders from the dreaded *valiahd* arrived. Mirza Hussein Agha's appeals for intercession with the Americans fell on deaf ears. They simply declared their hollow-sounding avowal to a policy of political neutrality and referred the *mujtahid* to their official British representative for redress.<sup>435</sup>

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<sup>433</sup> Ibid.

<sup>434</sup> Wratislaw to Hardinge, April 7, 1905, no. 17 (FO 248/851). Consul Wratislaw tried to relieve Majd al-Saltaneh's plight by transferring his property to the Persian Imperial Bank and also to get him honorary American citizenship. When the American Minister Pearson refused to offer his help, Wratislaw was enraged and asked the British Minister at Tehran to relieve of his duties to make representations on behalf of the American community. This diplomatic difficulty coupled with the missionaries' requests for an American consul at Tabriz, led to the establishment of an American consulate in Tabriz. This was the second time that the Americans established or strengthened their diplomatic ties with Qajar Iran on account of the complications between the Kurds and the missionaries.

The practice of transferring property to the Russian or British banks seemed to have become the surest way to safeguarding property. Even the *valiahd* himself had deposited his wealth in the bank and according to Wratislaw was completely indebted to the Russian bank and thus totally controlled by the Russians.

<sup>435</sup> Wratislaw to Hardinge, Tabriz, March 30, 1905, no. 12, (FO 248/851). Mirza Hussein Agha himself threatened riots, but his rival, the "Bala" Mujtahid, assured the governor of Urmia that he could maintain the public peace, provided Mirza Hussein Agha was not to return. He appealed to us and threatened the alternative would be disturbances. The missionaries replied that the matter was in the hands of the British Consul and they were powerless. He departed on the 23rd inst.

Subsequent to the transfer of the Kurdish prisoners to Tehran, the situation in Urmia remained critical as the new governor could not take any practical measures in light of the *valiahd*'s continued blocking of an expedition against the Begzadeh Kurds.<sup>436</sup> The constant death threats by the compromised Dasht chiefs against Dr. Cochran made the roads around Urmia unsafe for any missionary work. By May 1905, just before Dr. Cochran died of a sudden illness, the missionaries had come to realize that the case required an immediate closure if they were to continue working among the Nestorians in safety. Their government efforts to convince the Qajar officials to act had proved frustrating. In May, in an exchange between Consul Wratislaw and the Anglican Missionary Parry of Urmia, the two Britons decided that the ideal solution would be to send an expedition against the Kurds "such that it would be remembered for a generation." They mused that the *valiahd* might be on board with the plan now that he had been declared the regent. Alternatively, they agreed he could be presented with a *fait accompli*. Wratislaw inquired about the advisability of making peace with the Kurds since the imprisonment of their noted leaders and the removal of the governor must have fully impressed upon the Muslim population the prestige of the British government. Parry agreed that British tenacity must be impressed upon the Kurds but he doubted that negotiations would be an effective means of dealing with the Kurdish chiefs as they were woefully divided and at odds with one another and therefore any deal with one chief would fall through due to the violation of it by his rivals. The retention of one chief in Tehran as a hostage for good conduct may help to merely neutralize one clan among many others. Parry concluded that given the awful situation of the Christians and under such circumstances, "who would guarantee that the wolf would lie down with the

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<sup>436</sup> Wratislaw to Hardinge, April 15, 1905, (FO 248/851).

sheep?”<sup>437</sup> As to the proposed question of allowing Mirza Hussein Agha to return, Parry categorically rejected the idea, warning that all the good work to repair British prestige would be shattered as the Muslims would see only weakness in our attempts to intercede on behalf of the exiled *mujtahid*. “Mirza Hussein Agha,” Parry presaged, “will again become the adviser of the Kurds as to how to wreak vengeance.”<sup>438</sup>

In July 1905, Dr. Norton, whose presence in Urmia as a Special Commissioner for the case since December of 1904 had done little to improve things, suggested that a public trial should take place in Urmia. His proposal encountered stiff opposition from the American missionaries. The missionaries were well aware of the risks involved in a public trial in the close vicinity of the frontiers, where the Kurds held the advantage of military superiority besides enjoying a general popular sympathy among Urmia’s residents. Minister Pearson’s proposal to nominate someone from among the missionaries to appear at the trial was also rejected as the missionaries felt that they had already become too much involved politically, something that ran against the strict policy of the Presbyterian mission’s maintenance of political neutrality.<sup>439</sup>

In October 1905, a commissioner from Tehran was sent over to conduct the trial. British consul Albert Wratishlaw also arrived in Urmia in order to ensure that justice was served. The Kurds first refused to show up at the trial, but once assured that their case would be handled sympathetically by the Iranian authorities, they made their way to Urmia in the company of their armed tribesmen. They were thus able to get a favorable trial and the Kurdish prisoners of Dasht were subsequently released. They received a hero’s welcome from their tribesmen who came down from the mountains in large

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<sup>437</sup> Parry to Wratishlaw, Urmi, May 11, 1905, (FO 248/851).

<sup>438</sup> Ibid.

<sup>439</sup> Shedd to Secretary of State Elihu Root, Tabriz, July 12, 1907, USNA RG 84, Vol. 4.

numbers. With few alternatives at hand, the missionaries, who had received constant pleas from the Kurds to resolve the matter, requested an official closure to the case, fearing that further prolongation of it might compromise their precarious position in a volatile frontier region.

“The mission is of course very deeply interested in the deterrent influence of punishment; for while others may pass through the country, we live in it,”<sup>440</sup> wrote William A. Shed, who had started to represent the mission after the untimely deaths of Benjamin Labaree and Dr. Cochran. In closing his memorandum to the Secretary of State, Elihu Root, he stated that while the Kurds have suffered enough financially and have felt the power of the United States’ government, the mission’s “chief desire is that the case be closed and that the representative of the American Government have authority to make the settlement effective on the spot in the best practicable way.” This was especially an urgent request as he elaborated that “The brutal and utterly unprovoked murder of a German citizen a few months ago by the Kurds of a different tribe in the neighborhood of Souj Bulak shows how real the danger is and how important it is to punish such offenses.”<sup>441</sup> The question that concerned the missionaries the most, however, was whether delayed threats can retain any legitimacy after all.

On August 5, 1907, Shedd and Parry of the Presbyterian and Anglican churches sent a joint telegraphic report, confirming the occurrence of the very unfortunate event that they had feared all along. Majd al-Saltaneh, who had returned from the Caucasus upon the initial triumph of the Constitutional Revolution, and had taken command of the Urmia forces under the auspicious of the *amjuman* of Tabriz, mounted an expedition against the Dasht Kurds. After making a few small gains against the Kurds, his Kurdish

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<sup>440</sup> Ibid., p.5.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid., p.5.

allies joined the Ottoman frontier forces and soundly defeated and routed the Iranian forces. In the wake of this sudden turn of events, the Kurds raided the Nestorian villages of Tergawar, driving the last independent Christians out of their villages, creating a repeat of the refugee crisis. The Nestorians lost most of their property as they hastily fled from the mountains to the city where they took refuge on the premises of the Russian consulate.

The Ottoman commander in occupation of the disputed Lahijan frontier district, who assisted the Kurds to retake Tergawar, Dasht, and Mergawar districts, wrote to the Turkish consul in Urmia, asking him to inform the Iranians that “he had made the expedition on account of the disorder in the country, the danger to Sunnis in particular, and this irregular expedition against the Kurds.”<sup>442</sup> Majd al-Saltaneh responded by stating that the expedition had been taken as part of the Labaree case. Precisely due to his vigorous efforts to aid foreigners against Muslims and his efforts at reform, the Iranian general was blamed largely for the failed expedition by the conservative classes in Urmia, who had been silenced under the reign of the *anjuman* representatives. Majd al-Saltaneh had recently returned from exile at the encouragement of the revolutionaries of Azerbaijan, who had formed *anjumans* to administer the affairs of the province. Majd al-Saltaneh, a relative of the new governor Imam Quli Mirza, was a strong advocate of reforms. Yet, he was not universally popular and had encountered opposition from the conservative faction of the Urmia *anjuman*. Prior to the expedition, he had threatened to leave the country when a riot had broken out against him. However, he had been invited back to the town to preside over the *anjuman*. Among the first things he had undertaken was to form an army of *fedayis* (volunteers) from among the Urmia revolutionaries, the

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<sup>442</sup> Shedd to Consul Doty, Urumia, August 5, 1907, RG 84, Vol. 4, p.3.

Charduli and Karapapakh tribes, and factions of the Shikak and Dasht Kurds who had defected to the government side.

It was an ideal situation to mount the expedition, especially as Salar al-Dowleh's land property in Mergawar and Tergawar had also been leased to the Russian bank, and the Russians had brought a veteran military commander from Tehran to form and lead a Cossack regiment with the aim of protecting Russian property in Mergawar and Tergawar. When Salar al-Dowleh returned from Tiflis, however, he was chased out of town for having transferred his property to the Russians, the hated enemies of the *anjumans* who saw Russia as the protector of the reactionary regime of the despotic Mohammad Ali Shah. Lacking funds for the expedition, Majd al-Saltaneh extorted money from several uncooperative landlords, thus, creating more enemies for himself by relying merely on the aid of the progressive faction of the *anjuman*.<sup>443</sup>

The Sunni-Shi'i alliance, forged temporarily in the lead-up to the Constitutional Revolution, broke down as the Ottoman occupation gained pace, compelling the American missionaries to withdraw from further involvement in political affairs which had run deep in the course of the prosecution effort. The Begzadeh Kurds' relations with the Shi'i inhabitants of the region also drastically changed as they were compelled to throw in their lot with the Ottomans, who pursued their own specific objectives in backing the Kurds. Due to the Kurdish-missionary face-off, the foreign missions' relations with the local Kurdish communities would never be the same again as the Ottoman occupation relied heavily on the Kurds, whose ties to the Ottoman authorities were firmly grounded in sectarian affiliations in their opposition to their Shi'i and Christian counterparts. Since the occupation exerted a more lasting effect on the Kurdish

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<sup>443</sup> Parry to Stevens, Urmia, 1907, USNA RG, Iran Diplomatic Posts, Vol.4, 3.

sectarian identity and an emergent ethno-nationalist consciousness, the following section will investigate the complication of the Kurdish-American relations and the transformation of the borderlanders' identities as part of an extensive occupation enterprise by the Porte.

#### **BORDERLANDERS AMIDST OTTOMAN OCCUPATION AND IRANIAN REVOLUTION:**

The Ottoman occupation of the Sunni parts of northwestern Iran, which began in 1905 and lasted until 1912, was set in motion by a combination of historical circumstances and the consequent development of an ideology. As noted previously, following the Russo-Ottoman war of 1877-78, Sultan Abdülhamid II came to rule a truncated empire with a Muslim majority in the wake of further losses of imperial possessions in the Balkans. These developments spurred Abdülhamid II to invest in the office of the caliphate in order to create a sense of unity by promoting a policy of pan-Sunnism. The sultan's new ideological orientation had a particular appeal among the Sunni inhabitants of East Anatolia and northwest Iran. This appeal was further cultivated and promoted through the institution of the Hamidiye Light Cavalry. Having scored on the Armenian front through its special Kurdish regiments in the 1890s, the Porte took a step further by turning the Hamidiye into an advantage in its border disputes with Iran in creating a security buffer zone against Russia. The Kurdish *ashirets* inhabiting the Iranian northwestern frontier were poised to welcome integration within the caliph's domains as the sultan's special privileges to the Kurds had coincided with the Iranian constitutionalists' alienation of their Kurdish neighbors by their aggressive push into the frontier zone.<sup>444</sup>

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<sup>444</sup> Sabri Ateş, *The Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands: Making a Boundary, 1843-1914* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 229–31.

The moment was particularly right for Istanbul's encroachment on Iran as Russia and Iran were both caught in the throes of revolutionary movements. The Porte's close alliance with Germany as an emergent economic and military power on the international scene also heartened Istanbul to finally determine the status of its long-standing frontier disputes with Iran on its own terms. Russia's increasing influence over Iran, particularly in the neighboring province of Azerbaijan, also factored in as a threat on the Porte's agenda of establishing a security buffer zone. The British vice-consul of Van, Captain Dickson, maintained that since 1904, three reasons had rekindled Ottoman interest in the dormant frontier question: "The Russian plan for an extension of their railway to Julfa; the Russian road to Tabreez; the appointment of a Russian Vice-Consul at Urmia, and the wholesale conversion of the Assyrians in Persia to the Russian Church."<sup>445</sup> Division of Iran into British and Russian zones of influence in a formal treaty at the end of 1907 confirmed Istanbul's concerns and solidified its determination to press on with the occupation. The subsequent descent of Iranian constitutional revolutionary struggle into a civil war in Azerbaijan in 1908-09, which ended in a Russian military intervention in May 1909, convinced a resurgent Unionist regime in Istanbul not to waver in its vision of strengthening frontier security in East Anatolia and northwestern Iran.<sup>446</sup>

Istanbul justified the integration of the disputed districts in various ways. On one hand, the Porte claimed that it was helping Tehran to establish security in the frontier, arguing that Iranian authorities were incapable of restraining restive Kurdish tribes. This stance remained constant even under the Unionist regime after 1908 with some modifications. During Abdülhamid II's reign until July 1908, the Ottomans claimed they were helping the shah against the revolutionaries. When the Unionist regime ascended,

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<sup>445</sup> Dickson to O'Connor, December 14, 1907, *Schofield IV*, 262.

<sup>446</sup> Ateş, *The Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands*, 2013, 231–32.



the Porte declared that it was assisting the Iranian revolutionaries against the reactionary forces of the shah. Secondly, Istanbul asserted that the occupied districts had simply been reclaimed as they had come under Iranian control in the war of 1821-22. Finally, and, most importantly, the occupation was justified on sectarian grounds: the Porte insisted that Sunnis had always belonged to the sultan. The Ottoman troops' primary object, it was claimed, was to protect Iranian Sunni inhabitants against Shi'i persecution and the inhabitants' 'voluntary' requests for *dikhalats* (appeals for Ottoman protection and citizenship) served as proof of their desire to return to their historical and rightful place under Ottoman suzerainty. Thus, propping up *dekhaletnames* as signposts, Ottoman forces and their Iranian Sunni Kurdish allies, between 1905 and 1912, "occupied some thirty one districts, including Lahijan, Salmas, Chahrik, Somai, Bradost, Tergever, Mergever, Dasht, Baranduz, Deshtbil, Ushnu, Salduz, Sardasht, Alan, and Baneh, along with various villages in Saqqiz, Khoi, and Savojbulagh, in an area that spanned about 300 kilometers from north to south with a breadth varying from 20 to 80 kilometers."<sup>447</sup>

The initial opportunity for the occupation arose, in 1905, in an intertribal dispute among the Kurdish Bilbas confederation inhabiting the disputed districts of Vazneh-Lahijan, located southwest of Lake Urmia and west of Savujbulagh. Fearing renewed Armenian incursions into East Anatolia from Iranian territory<sup>448</sup> and Russia's increased domination over Iran, the war party (so-called by the British) in Istanbul advocated for the occupation of the disputed territories with Iran with the aim of establishing a security buffer zone against Russia. Thus, in August 1905, when rivalry over leadership among the Mamash and Mangur tribes of the Bilbas confederation led to the retreat of the losing parties into Ottoman domains, the *kaimakam* of Kirkuk intervened. The Ottoman official

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<sup>447</sup> Ateş, 233–34.

<sup>448</sup> Tyrell to O'Connor, Van, October 27, 1903, *Turkey. no.3 (1904)*, 7.

helped the dispossessed chiefs to defeat their rivals and to drive out Iranian troops from Savujbulagh, the capital city of the Sunni Kurds of Azerbaijan.<sup>449</sup> This incident marked the initial phase of the Ottoman forward movement. The Ottoman push into Iranian territory coincided with the Iranian authorities' preoccupation with the initial phase of the constitutional revolution, rendering any resistance on the part of the monarchy a formidable challenge. The task of protecting Iran's integrity would fall to the British and the Russian governments.

The Ottoman occupation of Bilbas and Mukri (Savujbulagh environs) districts unsettled British and Russian officials, who were determined to preserve Iranian territorial integrity in order to safeguard their Indian and Caucasian possessions, respectively. Their initial fervent diplomatic endeavors to stop the movement did not yield any positive results as Istanbul could not be persuaded. A recent clash with Armenian revolutionaries in Van had renewed Ottoman anxieties over frontier security. Moreover, the Ottoman border commission warned the sultan "that a withdrawal would upset local tribes and Hamidieh officers, and his prestige would suffer so seriously that he might be obliged to employ force to prevent a revolution of his own Kurdish subjects."<sup>450</sup> Concurrently, the Iranian revolutionary struggle, which had assumed an overtly sectarian character in Urmia between Shi'i revolutionists and Kurds, afforded further pretexts to the Porte to extend its integrative efforts.

In 1907, following a period of a general increase in Kurdish raids against the lowland districts of Salmas, Urmia, and Solduz, the revolutionists of Urmia, taking their lead from Tabriz, formed an *anjuman* (revolutionary city council) of their own. As their first task, the *anjuman*'s band of armed volunteers, known as *fedayis* or *mujahidin* (that

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<sup>449</sup> Ateş, *The Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands*, 2013, 235–40.

<sup>450</sup> Ateş, 244.

had taken up the task of protecting the revolutionary committees in the absence of a national guard), attacked the Sunni village of Band, located some two miles west of the city. In a skirmish, the Kurdish inhabitants of Band, purportedly assisted by Sheikh Siddiq's men, had killed their Shi'i master, Alijan Beg.<sup>451</sup> Enraged by the Sunni Kurds' increased depredations and inspired by the emerging discourse of patriotic duty and love of the homeland, the inhabitants of Urmia had begun to see the Kurds as the agents of an impending foreign intervention unremittingly reviled in the popular press.<sup>452</sup>

The random killing of three Kurdish visitors from Solduz in February 1907 revealed the depth of the sectarian animosity between the Shi'i inhabitants of Urmia and their Kurdish neighbors. Nationalist and sectarian motives helped the dissenting factions of the Urmia *anjuman* to transcend their foundational disagreements temporarily in favor of presenting a united front against the Kurds of Dasht in July and August of 1907. The situation had become overtly sectarian as the Kurdish tribes of Begzadeh and Herki in Tergawar and Mergawar had given *dikhlat* to the Ottoman authorities of Van in the previous year, which had been favorably received.<sup>453</sup> Thus, when Majd al-Saltaneh marshalled his combined revolutionary and tribal forces against the Begzadeh Kurds of Dasht, he faced an Ottoman army. Ferik Fazil Pasha, an Ottoman colonel, at the head of regular and Hamidiye troops, crossed the border into Iran and forced the Iranian troops into an ignominious retreat, justifying his campaign on the grounds of protecting Sunni Kurds. This successful campaign opened up the way for extension of Ottoman occupation to the districts of Ushnu, Tergawar, and Mergawar, Somai, Baradost, and Chahriq.<sup>454</sup>

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<sup>451</sup> Wratislaw to Cecil Spring Rice, Tabriz, January 5, 1907, (FO 248/913), 99.

<sup>452</sup> See Kashani-Sabet's *Frontier Fictions* for a detailed discussion of how the Iranian nationalist discourse took shape over concerns and anxieties about the shrinking borders of Iran.

<sup>453</sup> Report by Vice-Consul Dickson on His Recent Journey through Turco-Persian Territory, Van, December 14, 1907, *Schofield IV*, 263–69.

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid.*

The Ottoman defeat of the Iranian forces in August 1907 made it clear that resistance on the part of the beleaguered Iranian government was not an option. The situation was, however, remedied by the Anglo-Russian Convention of August 1907, which delineated the powers' respective spheres of influence in Iran and guaranteed Iran's territorial integrity. According to Firuz Kazemzadeh, "European politics, Britain's fear of the growing power of Germany, and Russia's need to recover from war and revolution brought the powers to an agreement that marked the end of Persian independence."<sup>455</sup> Thus, Russian and British officials took it upon themselves to lodge protests with the Porte and made loud declarations of support on behalf of the Iranian government.<sup>456</sup> There were reasons for such a strong show of support for Iran. From Russian and British perspectives, complications over the Ottoman-Iranian delimitation process held the potential to open the way for Germany as a mediator with its own designs on the region. Moreover, strong Iranian popular opposition against Ottoman occupation and the recent Anglo-Russian agreement, voiced from Tabriz and Tehran, could also lead to unpredictable outcomes for the powers' vested interests in Iran, the Caucasus, and India.

Sectarian tensions were flaring up in the region in 1907 as the Ottomans based their claims on protecting Sunnis against Shi'i and Armenian depredations in Tergawar and Baradost, while Iranian newspapers reported of Kurdish desecration of Shi'i places of worship, wanton killings, and looting of property.<sup>457</sup> In Savujbulagh, the murder of a young German scholar by Kurds had the British consul speculate that it was done with the object of undermining the position of the pro-Iranian Kurdish governor of the town,

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<sup>455</sup> Kazemzadeh, "Relations with Russia," 343.

<sup>456</sup> "Turkey And Persia." *Times* [London, England] 31 Jan. 1908: 7. *The Times Digital Archive*. Accessed on 5 April 2018.

<sup>457</sup> Nicholson to Grey, St. Petersburg, September 1, 1907, Schofield IV, 160.

and in preparation for a concerted assault on the town by Ottoman and Kurdish troops. Before long, an assault against Savujbulagh, led by Baiz Pasha Mamash, proved the consul's foresight. Around the same time, the district of Salmas also fell into disorder as Ikbāl al-Saltaneh of Maku's anti-constitutional Kurdish forces clashed with the *fedayis* of the Khoi *anjuman* in a bloody encounter. The infringement of Iranian territory and the setbacks to the revolutionaries of Khoi and Salmas led to a rising tide of anti-Ottoman sentiments as rumors also spread that the shah was conspiring with the sultan to create disorder in order to undermine the growing popular support for the revolutionaries.

Under such circumstances, as Kashani-Sabet has demonstrated, Iran's endangered territorial integrity created an emotive discourse that inspired national unity and resistance against foreign intervention. Secular and religious-minded revolutionaries alike criticized Ottoman infringement of Iran's sovereignty. "The crisis of Urumiyah not only troubled Iranians, but also the community of (Shi'i) Muslims, since the honor of Islam (*namus-i Islam*) - presumably Shi'i Islam - was called into question .... Referring to Urumiyah's victims as martyrs (*shahid*), one article stressed Muslim unity in combating the "satanic" machinations of Iran's enemies."<sup>458</sup> Such mobilization of popular support against foreign intervention, especially against Urmia by a Muslim power, through passionate appeals to Shi'i sentiments helped consolidate the construct of an emergent Iranian nation within an exclusivist sectarian framework. This ultimately furthered the alienation of the non-Shi'i segments of the society such as the Kurdish tribes of Azerbaijan's northwest frontiers.<sup>459</sup> Pressed by popular agitation against the Ottoman advance, and worried about the consequences of permanent annexation, which was by then unmistakably clear to be Istanbul's goal, the powers assigned British consul of

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<sup>458</sup> Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions*, 129.

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid.*, 107–8.

Tabriz Albert C. Wratislaw and the Russian vice-consul of Urmia Baron Tcherkassov the task of serving as “de facto members of the ineffective Ottoman-Iranian frontier commission.”<sup>460</sup> Tahir Pasha, the *vali* of Bitlis was appointed by the Ottomans. The Iranian government sent Muhatasham al-Saltaneh (Muhtasham from now on), who arrived in Urmia on December 22, 1907.

Muhtasham’s arrival in Urmia coincided with clashes between the discordant *anjuman* factions. Their struggle reflected the broader divisions that pitted the advocates of a secular constitutional government against those who aspired to install a *sharia*-based governing system. A similar struggle in Tabriz between rival factions created a general sense of insecurity, especially as the royalist Sayyid Hashem’s followers attacked the Christian quarter of Tabriz and looted Armenian property. Meanwhile, Sunni Kurds were engaged in a fierce fight with the forces of the new governor of Savujbulagh, Farman-Farma. Added to the complications were rumors of an impending plot by the Tabriz *fedayis* to assassinate the Russian consul Pokhitonov. Such rumors, coupled with peasant riots at Julfa against a Russian landlord, Haji Hassan Guendegi, led Russian officials to call in reinforcements of their consular guard in Tabriz.<sup>461</sup>

Amidst the turbulence rocking the province of Azerbaijan, the frontier commissioners’ negotiations were bound to stall. Muhtasham was preoccupied with addressing civil matters while the “Turks are playing the goat in their turn and put off the moment of meeting as long as they can.”<sup>462</sup> By February 1908, the Ottoman commission, led by the *vali* of Bitlis, Tahir Pasha, claimed that all Kurdistan, including ... the

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<sup>460</sup> Ateş, *The Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands*, 254.

<sup>461</sup> Tabreez, Jan 31 News Summary (p.119) Stevens to Grant Duff? : See also: Feb 29 (p. 127): (FO 248/944)

<sup>462</sup> Wratislaw to Marling, Urmi, January 14, 1908 (FO 248/944).

inhabitants of the Kurd villages scattered about the Urumia plain, belonged to Turkey.”<sup>463</sup> At this point, Ottoman policy in the occupied districts west of Urmia was in an inchoate shape given their recent annexation. However, as Captain Dickson’s report revealed, in the occupied districts of Tergawar, Mergawar, and Berdesur, primarily inhabited by Sunni *ashiret* Kurds, Ottoman policy seemed to be conciliatory.<sup>464</sup> This can be explained by the heavy reliance of the Porte’ claims to the disputed districts on the Kurdish chiefs’ goodwill and profession of allegiance to the sultan. The Ottomans were fully alive to the Iranian Kurdish *ashirets*’ fears vis-à-vis the extension of Ottoman central control. To ensure their loyalty, therefore, the Ottomans took care to preserve the compliant chiefs’ traditional privileges. However, in order to consolidate Ottoman control, the authorities had taken to replacement of pro-Iranian chiefs such as Pirot Agha of Herki by “men who owe their rise to the new order of things and who may be expected to prove more subservient.”<sup>465</sup>

Kurdish chiefs and notables in the *ashiret* districts were given latitude to run their affairs as long as they persisted in their professions of loyalty. In Mergawar, Tergawar, and Baradost, Ottoman authorities did not set up a coherent administration as these districts fell into the hands of Sayyid Taha of Nawchia, Sheikh Ubeydullah’s grandson. Further north, in the districts of Somai, Kotur, and Charik, where the Shikak tribes dominated the landscape, the occupation progressed at a slower pace and assumed a different form. First of all, as Dickson pointed out, the Shikaks were the most formidable and belligerent of all Kurdish tribes and thus would have to be approached with caution. Secondly, the valley of Kotur was out of Ottoman reach as it had been restored to Iran in

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<sup>463</sup> O’Conor to Grey, February 3, 1908, *Schofield IV*, 262.

<sup>464</sup> Report by Vice-Consul Dickson on His Recent Journey through Turco-Persian Territory, December 14, 1907, *Schofield IV*, 265-270.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

1878 by the Treaty of Berlin. Thirdly, the region was in the vicinity of the Russian Caucasus, which led the Ottoman authorities to advance more guardedly for fear of a Russian reaction. Finally, Khoi and Salmas were strong bastions of the Iranian constitutional movement as these districts were more closely under the sway of the Tabriz and Khoi *anjumans*.<sup>466</sup>

Thus, in order to extend the occupation into the Shikak territory around the most strategic frontier district of Somai, Kotur, and Salmas, Tahir Pasha commissioned the Hamidiye colonel Sheref Bey of Bashkale, a Shikak chief himself, to undertake the task of winning over the Somai Shikaks. This effort had been preceded by Sheikh Alaaddin of Urban's telegram to the sultan in September 1907, in which he had petitioned the caliph to protect Sunni subjects in the district of Salmas. Ismail Agha Shikak of Suranava, appointed by Iran as the governor of Somai and Baradost, in consultation with Sheikh Alaaddin on the subject of extension of Ottoman occupation, informed Sheref Bey that he was content with Iranian rule but would not resist advancement of Ottoman troops. Now it was Ismail Agha Simko's turn to proclaim his loyalty. He had fled into Ottoman territory after the treacherous assassination of his brother by the *valiahd* in Tabriz in 1905.

Upon his return from exile in Ottoman territory in May 1907, Ismail Agha Simko had initially approached the Khoi *anjuman* for his resettlement.<sup>467</sup> Later in September 1907, when the *fedayis* of the Khoi *anjuman* massacred hundreds of the Milan Kurds and destroyed much of their property, Simko had joined forces with Ikbāl al-Saltaneh, the royalist khan of Maku, against the revolutionaries of Khoi. After a commission from the

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<sup>466</sup> Report by Vice-Consul Dickson on His Recent Journey through Turco-Persian Territory, December 14, 1907, Schofield IV, 265-270.

<sup>467</sup> *Rūznāmah-i 'i Anjuman-i Tabrīz*, Chap-i 1, vol. 2 (Tih-rān: Kitābkhānah-i Millī-i Jumhūrī-i Islāmī-i Īrān bā hamkārī-i Ustāndārī-i Āzarbāyijān-i Sharqī, 1374), 294.



Tabriz *anjuman* was sent to investigate and resolve the Maku-Khoi conflict, the Khoi *anjuman* forces were identified as the main instigators of the conflict. Similarly, in one of the clauses of the peace deal, Simko was also charged with rebellion against the state and plundering of public property. However, since Simko's criminal activities had taken place after the Khoi-Maku conflict and the Salmas government was not able to arrest the Kurdish chief, it was stipulated that Ikbāl al-Saltaneh of Maku would grant him the governorship of Kotur on the condition that Simko would pledge to return the plundered property and that Ikbāl al-Saltaneh would take responsibility for his future conduct.<sup>468</sup>

Having thus secured the governorship of Kotur, Simko continued his raids against the lowland Armenian and Shi'i villages of Salmas and Khoi. Captain Dickson of Van claimed that Ottoman authorities instigated Kurdish raids in order to induce their Shi'i Azeri, Chaldean Nestorian, Kurdish, and Armenian inhabitants of Salmas to voluntarily apply for Ottoman protection and the subsequent occupation of the region.<sup>469</sup> Whatever the real reason, Simko persisted in his raids against the villages of Salmas and Khoi allegedly on the grounds that they were allied with the hostile *anjuman* forces and Armenian *fedayis*.<sup>470</sup> Simko's position at Kotur, confirmed by a joint agreement between the *anjuman* and royalist authorities, and the subsequent Ottoman overtures to win his allegiance, bear testimony to the complications arising from overlapping layers of authority in the region. Simko's stance was representative of a general trend, especially among frontier magnates. Similar to many other borderlanders in the period, he sat on the fence and remained non-committal to any person or cause other than those serving his immediate interests as an autonomous lord of the marches.

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<sup>468</sup> *Rūznāmah-i 'Anjuman-i Tabrīz*, 2:592.

<sup>469</sup> Dickson to O'Connor, no. 7, Van, March 15, 1908 (FO 195/2283)

<sup>470</sup> Dickson to O'Connor, no. 7, Van, March 15, 1908 (FO 195/2283)

Thus, as Captain Dickson pointed out, in consequence of the civil war, the frontier country around Salmas was divided between royalist and constitutional forces. While the revolutionary movement was mainly confined to towns, around Khoi and Salmas, it had also spread to the villagers of the plains. Since the villagers' properties were owned by the shah, it appeared that in their alliance with the *anjuman*, they had hoped to secure temporary tax reliefs and to check Kurdish raids. An opportunist Simko, whose brother had been assassinated on the current shah's orders, had nevertheless deemed it beneficial to throw in his lot with the royalist Ikbāl al-Dowleh in order to boost his personal wealth and power and to stave off the threat to his position from the Armenian and Azeri revolutionaries. The result was a dreadful state of affairs for the Kurdish, Shi'i, and Christian villagers, who were caught in the crossfire of both sides, as members of the *anjuman* retaliated against Simko by encouraging rival Shikak factions to plunder the villages of Kotur.<sup>471</sup>

While Simko Agha Shikak sought to preserve his position at Kotur, his would-be ally Seyyid Taha was also hard at work on a different front, promoting Ottoman rule among Iran's Kurdish tribes. Like other Kurdish notables in the Hamidian era, Seyyid Taha also sought to apply state backing to his advantage in the race for accumulation of land. His was more personal as Taha sought to accomplish what his father, Sheikh Siddiq, had failed to achieve all his life. With the forward movement of Ottoman troops into Iran in 1907, it was time to restore his grandfather's confiscated property in Mergawar. Inheriting his father's immense wealth in Nawchia and his grandfather's

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<sup>471</sup> Dickson to O'Connor, no. 7, Van, March 15, 1908 (FO 195/2283); For instance, in October 1907, the *anjuman* representatives of Salmas issued a warning to the villagers of Deri, located two hours from Kotur, to the effect that if they did not attempt to expel Simko, they would be punished by the *anjuman* forces. And of course, since the villagers had no such military strength to confront Simko's well-armed men, Deri was raided and sacked by the Mamedī Shikaks, who then divided up the plunder with the *anjuman* representatives in Salmas.

enormous prestige as a Naqshbandi leader, Seyyid Taha was well positioned for ascendancy in the frontier zone. The time was even more propitious as his father's death in 1907 coincided with the second Ottoman attempt at extending the occupation. Seyyid Taha's influence among the Kurds as a prestigious religious figure from the renowned family of the Shamdinan sheikhs was a quality appreciated by the Ottoman authorities in favor of promoting their occupation of the disputed territories. It would be a mutually beneficial cooperation as Taha could also reap the benefits of the forward movement by adding to his already sizeable land-holdings.

The moment for Seyyid Taha's adventurous political career began during Majd al-Saltaneh's 1907 expedition against the Begzadeh Kurds of Dasht for their defiance of government authority, refusal to pay taxes, and the assassination of the American missionary, Rev. Labaree. While the commander of the expedition, Majd al-Saltaneh, was trying to induce the surrender of the Begzadeh chiefs, Seyyid Taha addressed a letter to Gurgin Beg of Dasht, encouraging him to resist Iranian Shi'is' overtures as Ottoman aid was at hand:

All these fortunate things have come your way, yet you have fallen for the words of Majd al-Saltaneh and others and are in the process of applying for *dekhalat* and paying bribes. Shame on you for not having any honor and for willingly falling for the Iranians' mendacity and ruses. Let it be known that I alerted you and that I should be spared any blame for not having informed you [in advance]. I am writing to prevent future criticism. Each and every one of you has a reputation. Is it not shameful and dishonorable that you serve some certain people?! Rest assured that once anyone of you sets foot in the camp of the '*ajams* [Iranian Shi'is], he will not return. What was the use in returning the plundered property of the '*ajams* and thus making yourself blameworthy in the eyes of the Exalted Ottoman State?... May God give you some sense. How would you submit to the authority of the '*ajams* after you have prevailed and make yourself blameworthy before the Rum [Ottoman state]?<sup>472</sup>

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<sup>472</sup> Sheikh Mohammad Taha, "Copy of Letter to Gurgin Beg." *Faryad* (Urmia, Iran), No. 19, 27 Jamadi al-Akhir 1325/ 25 August 1907 (letter itself is dated 8 July 1907).

Documentation is scant about Seyyid Taha's activities in this early phase of the Ottoman occupation but later evidence produced by the British and Russian border commissioners and the Iranian *karguzar* of Urmia attest to his success in acquiring ownership of parts of Mergawar and Tergawar. The fact that in 1911 the European commissioners singled out these districts for their lack of a proper administrative structure suggests that the area had been left under Taha's jurisdiction. It is also evident that much like his father's, Seyyid Taha's authority was fiercely disputed by his rivals among the Begzadeh and Herki *ashiret* chiefs, prominent among whom was Karim Khan Herki, the *mudir* of Anzal. Frequent disputes, which occasionally erupted into open warfare between the two chiefs, imply that the Ottoman authorities' efforts at reconciliation between the contending parties were hardly successful. It could also be surmised that the Ottoman authorities even fostered a degree of rivalry among these power contenders to prevent the rise of another Ubeydullah or another troublesome figure like the Hamidiye chief of the large Haydaranli tribe around Bayazid.

While Seyyid Taha's influence was sought and applied to the promotion of their cause among the Sunni Kurds of Iran, Karim Khan Herki's position as the paramount chief of a large tribe was also a significant factor in the Ottomans' calculations. Karim Khan's incorporation within the administration in the occupied districts as the *mudir* of the Shi'i and Nestorian district of Anzal fit well within the larger and durable Ottoman policy of settling frontier tribes. Such an attractive incentive as the governorship of a rich district, not only helped to entrench the new order among the non-Sunni communities through a trusted Sunni Kurdish chief, but it could also induce Karim Khan to convince

the nomadic section of the Herki under his brother Haji Dervish Agha to permanently settle in the rich river valley of Anzal under Ottoman protection.<sup>473</sup>

These developments in the *nevahi-i şarkiyye* (the Ottomans gradually came to refer to the annexed districts as eastern regions) reflected the dynamics brought about in East Anatolia under the Hamidian rule since 1891 when the project of the Hamidiye Light Cavalry was first launched. The Hamidiye officers' special status placed them beyond the jurisdiction of civil authorities. Under such favorable circumstances, they made great contributions to the Ottoman policy of settling nomadic populations as they acquired vast tracts of land on which they gradually settled their tribesmen. Prominent Hamidiye chiefs such as Hussein Pasha of the Haydaranli and Sheref Bey of the Shikak lent valuable support to the Ottoman authorities in dealing with the Armenian revolutionaries' threat through military force and other less dramatic mechanisms of control such as displacement of Armenian peasantry. This latter, they did through pursuing various land-grabbing schemes including the semi-legal means of intimidating peasants to sign over title deeds or, if that failed to work, through outright usurpation.<sup>474</sup>

The occupation authorities' special considerations for the Iranian *ashiret* chiefs and notable religious personalities such as Karim Khan Herki and Seyyid Taha unleashed similar processes in the occupied zone by sparking a fierce competition over land

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<sup>473</sup> Report by Vice-Consul Dickson on His Recent Journey through Turco-Persian Territory, December 14, 1907, Schofield IV, 264. Dickson notes that Piro Agha was formerly the chief of the nomadic section of the Herki who pastured flocks in Mosul during winter. Piro Agha served as an intermediary between the rebellious Begzadeh and Herki chiefs, including Karim Khan Herki, and but according to Dickson, he also participated in the sack of the Nestorian village of Mawana. This information suggests that he must have switched over his alliance to the Ottoman side when it became clear that Ottoman troops had come to the aid of the rebellious chiefs against Majd al-Saltaneh. His subsequent removal and replacement by Haji Dervish Agha, a brother of Karim Khan, indicates that the occupation authorities no longer trusted him and wanted to empower another chief whose ascendancy to the chieftaincy of his nomadic tribe would take place through Ottoman backing and as such he would have to remain loyal in order to be able to maintain his position.

<sup>474</sup> Klein, *The Margins of Empire*, 147–52.

acquisition. In the Sunni-populated districts of Savujbulagh, Bilbas, Ushnu, Mergawar, Tergawar, Somai, and Baradost, loyal Kurdish *ashiret* chiefs generally remained in control of their lands and pastures and competition was less intense as Ottoman regular troops kept these districts under closer control. However, different mechanisms were applied to the mixed districts in the Shi'i and Nestorian plains of Salmas, Urmia, and Solduz. In these lowlands, Shi'i Afshar and Karapapakh notables had long dominated the social hierarchy as landlords loyal to the Iranian regime. In fact, these regions, by the logic of their ethno-religious composition, consisting of Shi'is and Nestorian and Armenian Christians, had long served as a bulwark against the ever-present menace of the *ashiret* Kurds of the frontier highlands. The Ottoman occupation authorities had to devise other plans to bring the inhabitants of these regions under firm control.

Unlike in East Anatolia, where the Hamidiye chiefs engaged in land-grabbing enterprises with tacit approval from Mushir Zeki Pasha of Erzinjan, in the *nevahi-i şarkiyye*, the Ottoman authorities actively sought and encouraged Kurdish land-grabbing drives in the river valleys and plains of Salmas, Urmia and Solduz. In their plans to incorporate these districts, Ottoman authorities had the advantage of experience with the Hamidiye institution. They were aware that the Kurdish *ashirets* of Iran could serve as an asset if properly incentivized. Given that the Porte faced concerted pressure from Russia and Britain to resolve its boundary disputes with Iran through more peaceful channels of negotiations, the Ottoman authorities had to act in a cautious manner to bolster the legitimacy of their claims to the ownership of these districts. Obtaining voluntary *dikhlat*s were the most effective means of doing so. However, in the lowlands, such 'voluntary' petitions for Ottoman protection and nationality had to be pressed through the coercive force of the Kurdish *ashirets*. It was obvious that the Afshar and Karapapakh landlords'

established interests and their sectarian affiliation with the Iranian government generally disinclined them to willingly accept changes in the traditional socio-economic structure.

The outbreak of the Iranian revolution provided the opportunity to the Ottomans to proceed with their covert coercive measures to obtain *dikhalats*. As the Iranian revolution descended into a civil war in the second half of 1908, splintering centers of authority and causing marked instability, the Ottoman claim of providing security in the occupied region proved more persuasive. Numerous individuals and villages applied for Ottoman protection either voluntarily or as a result of intimidation by Ottoman troops or terror from Kurdish raiders. What follows is a detailed discussion of the mechanisms employed by the Ottoman authorities to extend their control over the mixed lowland river valleys and plains and the city of Urmia in the context of the Iranian revolutionary struggles and the impact these processes left on the intercommunal relations among Kurds, Azeris, Nestorians, and Armenians.

The year 1907 was an eventful time for the inhabitants of the region as a slowly developing Ottoman occupation heartened the Kurds of Dasht to intensify their attacks against the Shi's and Nestorian inhabitants of the lowlands. Early in January 1907, as it was noted, the murder of a Shi'i Alijan Beg by the Sunni Kurds of Band village led to an intense reaction from the Shi'i residents of Urmia. In retaliation, three visiting Kurds from Salmas were murdered in a mob attack in the city. Soon, the *fedayis* of the Urmia *anjuman*, which had taken over the administration, led an expedition against this Sunni village and destroyed it. In an atmosphere of panic, the Sunni subjects in town either took refuge in the Ottoman consulate or hoisted Ottoman flags.<sup>475</sup>

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<sup>475</sup> Tabriz Jan 5, 1907 (p. 99) also Jan 9 (p. 104)

Meanwhile, in Salmas and Savujbulagh, Kurdish raids laid waste to the region. Also, in Salmas, rivalry between the Khoi *anjuman* revolutionists and the khan of Maku led to bloody encounters. Back in Savujbulagh, the murder of a German scholar, was followed by an attack on the city by the Bilbas tribes, forcing out the Iranian governor. Russia also amassed troops on its Caucasian border in the vicinity of Khoi and Tabriz. Threat of foreign intervention and a general breakdown of security led the opposing *anjuman* factions of Tabriz to broaden their representative body by including members from the landed and clerical classes. During the peaceful respite that followed from the stabilization of the situation in Tabriz, a revolutionary *mujtahid* Mirza Javad Agha toured Khoi, Salmas, and Urmia with the object of propagating the revolutionary ideology. In his passionate speeches in Urmia, which generally highlighted the merits of unity against the threat of Russian and British intervention, Mirza Javad Agha stressed the need for Muslim-Christian solidarity. A number of foreign missionaries, Nestorians and Armenians, and the British consul Albert Wratislaw also attended his speeches in the main mosque in Urmia.<sup>476</sup>

Mirza Javad Agha's sojourn in Urmia boosted the revolutionary spirit among the Shi'i and Christian inhabitants, who were now united in their common cause and hostility to the Sunni Kurds who had allied themselves with an encroaching foreign Ottoman power. Even so, dissensions among rival pro-constitutional and a *sharia*-based government persisted beneath the surface. However, with the return to Urmia of the reform-minded Majd al-Saltaneh from exile in Tiflis in the Caucasus, factionalism temporarily gave way to a spirit of national unity among Urmia residents. Made up of Nestorians, Shi'i *fedayis*, and a number of Shikak and Charduli tribes, Majd al-Saltaneh

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<sup>476</sup> Davud Qasim'pur, *Inqilāb-i Islāmī Dar Urūmīyah* (Tihiran: Markaz-i Asnād-i Inqilāb-i Islāmī, 1391), 39–42.



led his army against the Kurds of Dasht, who were now deemed the enemies of the Iranian nation. At any case, as noted above, the expedition failed, after which Ottoman occupation spread further afield. In the trail of the Ottoman campaigns, Kurdish vengeance raids against Tergawar's Christians led to a refugee crisis in Urmia, allowing the Russian vice-consul to turn the occasion into an opportunity to entrench Russian influence. The Russian vice-consul undertook to protect the refugees. He even took a step further in preventing them from returning to their villages in spite of Ottoman offers of amnesty and protection.<sup>477</sup>

By late 1907, Imam Kuli Mirza, the old Afshar governor of Urmia had been forced out by the *anjuman fedayis* of Urmia; Majd al-Saltaneh was gone; and authority was divided between the Russian and Ottoman consuls and an *anjuman* riven by factionalism. Albert Wratislaw summed up the situation in the following terms:

“The situation here would be extremely comic were it not so annoying. Our four or five hundred Fedais are flouting with impunity not only the Teheran Government which does not count, but the Tabriz Enjumen, which does, or has hitherto. The city fathers of Tabriz are very indignant, and have condescended to use very insulting terms with reference to the Fedais [at Urmia] in their telegrams, such as Cuckolds, pimps, and sons of burnt fathers. The Fedais only smile and play their own game. They will certainly have to be suppressed, but who is to do it?”<sup>478</sup>

The year 1908, by and large, witnessed a rise in Kurdish raids on the lowland villages as the Ottoman occupation authorities endeavored to extend their control over the plains. As a result, the inhabitants found themselves amidst contending and overlapping sources of authority emanating from revolutionary committees, foreign consuls and missionaries, a border commissioner serving as a royalist governor, and Kurdish chiefs on a quest for more lands and villages. In March 1908, Wratislaw noted that Tahir Pasha

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<sup>477</sup> Parry to Stevens, Urmi, August 7, 1907 (FO 248/913).

<sup>478</sup> Wratislaw to Marling, Urmi, December, 4 1907, (FO 248/913), 429.

and Muhtasham could not see eye to eye. Tahir Pasha furiously claimed that Muhtasham had a contemptuous attitude, which he exhibited through persecuting the Sunni subjects of Urmia. While Wratislaw denied that there was any sign of such a treatment of Sunnis by Muhtasham, he noted that the influx of Sunni Kurds to the city had caused some anxiety among the Shi'i residents.<sup>479</sup>

The British consul-general also reported that Muhtasham had been placed in a difficult position as he was prevented by the Ottomans to maintain order in the districts claimed but not occupied by Ottoman troops. For instance, the districts of Baranduz and Dol (in Solduz) frequently came under raids by Karim Khan Herki. Closer to the city, in villages outside the Ottoman zone of occupation, the Begzadeh Kurds under Mehmet Beg and Temer Beg, had established themselves in certain villages they had claimed to be under their protection. These chiefs' acquired position had apparently been authorized by Muhtasham, who hoped to win them over to the Iranian side as part of an effort-bargain to establish security.<sup>480</sup> However, Wratislaw mentioned that this was yet another way for the Kurdish chiefs "to indulge their predatory instincts to the full."<sup>481</sup>

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<sup>479</sup> Wratislaw to Marling, Urmi, March 2, 1908, (No. 4 confidential), *Schofield*, Vol. 4, 298. Iranian authorities constantly accused the Ottoman authorities such as Fazil Pasha, Colonels Remzi Bey and Yaver Bey, and Tahir Efendi Yuzbashi of inciting the Begzadeh Kurds to raid and plunder the villages across the Urmia plain with the aim of *ihdas-i masalah-yi Sunni va Shi'i*, i.e., creating a Sunni-Shi'i question. The Ottomans, in turn, responded that the Kurds had been more restrained under Ottoman rule and the voluntary support and allegiance of the Kurds for the Ottoman state was due to their desire to protect their honor and safety against Iranian authorities such as Farman-Farma. See for instance, High Porte to Iranian Embassy, 22 rabi' al-avval 1322 hijri qamari [April 24, 1908], *Guzidah-i Asnad*, Vol. 6, 520.

<sup>480</sup> Muhtasham's recognition of Temer Beg was protested by Tahir Pasha and the Ottoman Foreign Minister Tevfik Bey on the grounds that Mutasham's recognition of Temer and his allies had induced other Tergawar chiefs such as Bedir Khan Bey to also entertain the idea of realigning themselves with Iranians and starting their old habits of plunder, for which Ottoman Kurds will be held repsonsibel. For instance, see Iranian Embassy in Istanbul to Foreign Ministry, 1 Sha'ban 1326 H.Q. [29 August 1908], *Guzidah-yi Asnad*, Vol. 6, 559, and also Ottoman Foreign Minister to Iranian Embassy, 22 Ramazan 1326 H.Q. [17 October 1908], *Guzidah-yi Asnad*, Vol. 6, 563.

<sup>481</sup> Wratislaw to Marling, Urmi, May 17, 1908, *Schofield IV*, 322.

Moreover, Wratislaw reported that the Urmia-Salmas road had been unusually quiet. The reason he gave for the relative security of the road was connected to the Shikak intertribal rivalry. The Shikak tribes of Somai and Chahriq, under the Ottoman-appointed governor Ismail Agha of Suranava, were about to clash with those of their rival Shikak chief, Simko Agha of Kotur. Simko was in alliance with the royalist Ikbal al-Saltaneh of Maku, who had been entrusted by the *anjuman* and the shah with the maintenance of order in the region extending from Maku to the borders of Urmia. In a collaborative effort to consolidate his local powerbase, Ikbal al-Saltaneh had put some two hundred cavalry under Muhtasham, who maintained his precarious hold over Urmia through subsuming the *anjuman*'s authority within his administration.<sup>482</sup> Thus, the two royalist governors, driven by motives of self-preservation in their alliance with royalists, had temporarily managed to create a cordon to ward off Kurdish raids from the Urmia-Salmas road.

Further south, the Zerza khans of Ushnu, led by Mutafa Khan, conducted raids against the possessions of their traditional Shi'i Karapapakh rivals in Solduz all the way down to the lake.<sup>483</sup> These raids extended to the large and prosperous Nestorian villages on the banks of the lake. Such recent attacks on the Nestorian villages of Goktapa, Ardishai, and Takaya had created a panic among the inhabitants, leading the rival missions of Urmia to unite in their efforts to produce some kind of order in light of the Iranian state's incapacitation.<sup>484</sup> Taking note of the novelty of these raids, the American

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<sup>482</sup> Ibid. See also William A. Shedd's Report of Civil and Political Affairs, Urmia Station, 1908, PHS.

<sup>483</sup> Persian Embassy at Constantinople to the Ottoman Government, June 8, 1908 *Schofield IV*, 323-24.

<sup>484</sup> The *Times* reported: "Telegraphic communication with Urumiah is interrupted. A deputation which is on its way from that town to Teheran arrived here yesterday, and reported that on June 12 three villages inhabited by Syrians and Armenians, about 25 versts [sic] from Urumiah, were attacked by Kurds. On receipt of this intelligence Tahir Pasha, commander of the Turkish forces on the frontier, announced that from humanitarian considerations the Porte was willing to send four battalions of infantry to Urumiah to restore order. On the demand of the Russian and British Consuls here, a commission of inquiry has been sent to Urumiah, into which town fugitives are flocking from all sides." See, "Persia." *Times* [London,

Presbyterian mission head, William A. Shedd, stated that “never before in the memory of man, not even when Sheikh Obeidullah made his raid in 1880, have Kurds attacked them [Ardishai and Takaya villages].”<sup>485</sup>

The crisis came to a head in June 1908, when the constitutionalist forces in Tabriz embarked on a course of resistance against royalist attempts to wrest back control of Azerbaijan and to restore the shah’s autocracy. The Tabriz revolutionaries’ inspiring resistance under Sattar Khan and Bagher Khan soon spread to the *anjumans* of Salmas, Khoi, and Urmia. Members of Armenian *fedayi* bands from the Caucasus and Salmas also weighed their support on the liberal side. This Christian show of strength on behalf of the nationalist cause stirred the divided Nestorian communities who also began to organize defense forces. According to Shedd, “the open union of the Armenians with the Persian nationalists has brought a new element into the whole problem, and makes more difficult than ever the neutral position maintained by the Syrians [Nestorians] in all of these civil disorders in Persia.”<sup>486</sup> In a moment of optimism over the successful emergence of a spirit of unity among Shi’i Muslims and Christians, Shedd excitedly reported on a massive expression of solidarity by the majority Shi’i population of Urmia over the death of an Armenian *fedayi* in battle against Kurds. In December of 1908, the fallen Armenian *fedayi*’s “funeral was attended by thousands, including the principal nobility of the city, and speeches were made, such as the streets of Urumia never before heard.”<sup>487</sup>

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England] 22 June 1908: 8. *The Times Digital Archive*. Accessed on 5 April 2018, URL: <http://find.galegroup.com/ttda/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=TTDA&userGroupName=txshracd2598&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&docId=CS134411990&type=multi page&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0>

<sup>485</sup> William A. Shedd, Report of Civil and Political Affairs Urumia Station, 1908 (PHS)

<sup>486</sup> Ibid.

<sup>487</sup> William A. Shedd, Report of Civil and Political Affairs Urumia Station, 1908 (PHS).

Concurrent Ottoman occupation and revolutionary outbreak in Iran and the Ottoman Empire created a confusing situation for the borderland region's communities and individuals, including the foreign missionaries. The city of Urmia itself truly reflected the chaotic situation characterized by multiple layers of competing authority. Within a year from the inauguration of the revolution in 1906, an *anjuman* had been formed in Urmia with elected membership only to be disbanded and overshadowed by a royalist governor. The Nestorians had also managed to mobilize as a national community in the hope to transcend their factionalism caused by membership in multiple missions. However, these attempts had all proven abortive as a lack of interdenominational consensus had frustrated their efforts to send an elected delegate to the provincial assembly in Tabriz. This situation also applied to the Shi'i residents, who had similarly failed to move past their disagreements to send a delegate to the Tabriz *anjuman*. Meanwhile, some two thousand Nestorian refugees from the Tergawar continued to languish on the Russian consular premises in the city as Kurdish raids continued unabated.

Such confusion and perplexity characterized by competing communal visions and contending layers of authority were further reflected in the Ottoman vice-consul's origins and activities. Between 1907 and 1909, Agha Petros, known otherwise as Peter Ellow, a Catholic Nestorian from Hakkari, served as the Ottoman *tajirbashi* [commercial agent], who also fulfilled the functions of the Ottoman vice-consul in Urmia. Agha Petros was identified by the British consul at Tabriz as a "notorious Nestorian swindler who is "wanted" by the Police of British Columbia on a charge of obtaining large sums of money by false pretenses under the name of "the Reverend J. A. Day D.D." In his capacity as an Ottoman agent and vice-consul, he was hard at work to promote the Ottoman occupation by obtaining *dikhalats* from Shi'i, Kurdish, and Nestorian villagers

of the plain.<sup>488</sup> He was also instrumental in promoting the new Ottoman order among his fellow Nestorians and was even able to win over the favor of the American missionaries as a representative of the Ottoman government. Shedd described him as an individual “whose career does credit to his energy if not to our moral training.”<sup>489</sup>

As it appears from Agha Petros’ activities, the Ottoman authorities used all channels available to them to cultivate a sympathetic outlook among the inhabitants of the integrated border districts. These efforts on the part of the Ottomans, advanced through Agha Petros and Kurdish raids, combined with the splintering of Iranian revolutionary forces and loyalists and missionary activities had presented the communities with several competing visions at a moment of transition. Amidst war and revolution, identities were in flux. Shedd aptly described the situation when he said:

We are living at the meeting place of two storms and this has mitigated the force of the tempest...In the midst of all the confusion, ... wither is Persia drifting? One answer can be given and perhaps only one. It is drifting away from the past. Anarchy or foreign occupation may ensue. We may be under Russian or Turkish rule. In any case the old order has gone forever.<sup>490</sup>

The confusion and the stark choices confronted by all the inhabitants of the northern Ottoman-Iranian borderland stretch, including the numerous missionaries, under occupation in the middle of a chaotic revolution can better be captured in Shedd’s 1909 “Report on the Political Condition of the Country and the Relations of the Missionary Work to Them.” Shedd’s hesitation about writing the report due to the missionaries perennial fear of getting drawn into political matters pointed to the confusion, and the numerous possibilities and dangers lying before all those living between the “two storms.” The American missionary’s dilemma was not merely confined to the foreign

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<sup>488</sup> Wratislaw to Barclay, Tabriz, May 30, 1909, no. 20, (FO 248/974).

<sup>489</sup> William A. Shedd, Report on Political Conditions of the Country and the Relations of the Missionary Work to Them, August 1909, (PHS).

<sup>490</sup> William A. Shedd, Report of Civil and Political Affairs Urumia Station, 1908 (PHS).

communities of Urmia. It also reflected those of the inhabitants at large as they were standing at a crossroads with monumental changes unfolding before their eyes. The opening of the report reveals the nature of the complications and the difficult choices before all sides as 'Persia was drifting away from the past.'

I have felt some hesitation this year in attempting to write a report on the civil and political affairs of this region in their relation to our mission work. For one thing the state of affairs is so intricate that it is no easy task to write such a report and in the second place the whole subject lies on the debatable ground of missions, and doubt constantly arises whether in taking a part in such matters and in reporting that part the proper boundary is not being transgressed.<sup>491</sup>

Among the numerous challenges Shedd listed, the most important seemed to be a confounding absence of a clear source of authority. For one, the weight of the Ottoman occupation was fully impressed on the mission and others through the energetic measures taken by the Ottoman agent, Agha Petros. This ambitious Nestorian figure, who would later play a prominent role in the intercommunal massacres of Urmia, Salmas, and Savujbulagh as an 'Assyrian general', vigorously promoted the new Ottoman order through cultivating relations with Kurds, *fedayi* leaders, Nestorians, and missionaries. His obligations as an unofficial Ottoman vice-consul, however, did not stop him from simultaneously augmenting his own personal wealth through underhand schemes. Like Simko and Seyyid Taha, he too changed hats and exploited every opportunity to increase his wealth. Besides selling Ottoman certificates of nationality, he also engaged in purchasing and leasing property from desperate landlords and subjects, who were paralyzed by their lack of confidence in their ability to retain their possessions.

What added to the complications involved in the Ottoman occupation further was the waxing and waning of competing contenders of authority over the city affairs among

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<sup>491</sup> Report on the Political Condition of the Country and the Relations of the Missionary Work to Them by William A. Shedd, 1909, p. 1, (PHS).

the representatives of the revolutionary *anjumans* and those of the *ancien régime*. Such struggles for authority and control were waged on political, ideological, and social fronts, creating challenges, which were not merely confined to the foreign missions. The dilemma gnawed at the hearts of many a Kurdish tribal chief, landlord, and subject alike. The position of the landlords' was particularly precarious. Having acquired their wealth under the old regime, they had now become easy targets for both Ottoman authorities and revolutionary factions. The Ottomans dispossessed the Shi'i landlords through favoring Kurdish chiefs or through imposing new taxation regulations that sharply curbed their ability to collect customary dues from their subjects.

On the other hand, the Iranian revolutionaries ostensibly promoted social and anarchist ideologies that had infiltrated the country from the Russian Caucasus. These ideologies, which often manifested in practice in the form of coerced contributions or forcible redistribution of land among subjects, were enforced by popular revolutionary committees in accordance with their own understandings and interpretations of socialism. A number of the *fedayis* of the *anjumans* of Tabriz and Urmia had lived in the Caucasus and had imbibed socialist principles. When they found the chance, they rode on popular sentiments to elicit contributions from certain landlords. Urmia's landlords, however, were not without alternatives. They too joined the game of changing nationalities as they saw fit in order to protect their properties. They were ready to ally with whichever side that offered them protection. Even so, swift political turnabouts made all classes of the society vulnerable and exposed. The events of the last two years, and especially the first five months of 1909 poignantly proved this point. The changing nature of the occupation under the Unionist regime in Istanbul and Russia' subsequent occupation of the region will be discussed in chapter five.



This chapter showed the complications the borderlanders faced amidst monumental changes unfolding in a peripheral region that had come under intense imperial state scrutiny and rivalry over their subjecthood and belonging. The American missionaries were drawn into the political arena as the avowed patrons of the Nestorians. The assassination of Rev. Labaree showed the drastic changes in the collective identity of the Kurdish tribes as a Sunni community. Concerted Ottoman efforts to protect their vulnerable frontiers by investing in the identity of one group against another beholden to external support had proven largely successful. As a result of intercommunal violence in Ottoman East Anatolia, the relations between Kurds and Christians of the Iranian frontier region of Azerbaijan had also assumed a pronounced sectarian character, an ancillary result of which was the targeting of the American missionaries as protectors of Christians.

The occupation of the northwest region of Iran by the Ottoman state proved to be a step farther in the sectarianization of relations between the Muslim and Christian communities of the region as Iranian Kurdish tribes became the agents advancing and maintaining the Ottoman occupation regime. The Nestorian and Shi'i communities of Salmas, Urmia, and Solduz became targets of sustained violence as the Ottomans relied on Kurdish raids to force their consent to the extension of Ottoman sovereignty. Their suffering greatly increased as their nationalist endeavors were circumscribed by Ottoman and Russian occupations and a formidable counter-revolutionary movement on the part of royalist tribal forces. The Ottoman state, with a view to the presumed success in secure the loyalty of the *ashiret* Kurdish chiefs in East Anatolia, extended the Hamidiye institution to the occupied districts in Iran. As part of the occupation, the Ottoman authorities incentivized the Kurds by offering them a regime of privileges in order to bind their loyalties firmly to the Ottoman state. In the process, as new ideologies burst open

onto the scene, with Shi'i revolutionary sentiments floating around, the intercommunal relations between Kurds and Shi'is and Christians assumed a more salient sectarian character as the Kurds were recast as the collaborators with a Sunni occupying force against a Shi'i nation that was emerging through the powerful medium of a popular revolutionary movement.

Moreover, communal identities were in flux and the Ottoman efforts to win the Kurds once and for all, nevertheless, remained an elusive dream. Granted, they did help to sectarianize the intercommunal relations further in the region, but as the case of Simko and Agha Petros show, the borderland elite were more as much driven, if not more, by material gains than by any ideological and sectarian considerations. Simko's position at Kotur, out of Ottoman reach, was secure enough so he preferred to retain his autonomy and continue his old business of enriching himself through looting the lowlands rather than to submit to Ottoman authority and pay tribute. Similarly, Agha Petros, even though a Christian Nestorian, he felt more secure under Ottoman protection as he was wanted by the authorities of British Columbia for his scams and illicit business of collecting donations under false pretexts. Thus, in order to safeguard his position, he displayed a great deal of zeal in promoting the Ottoman order among his coreligionists and others in the integrated districts. Thus, while sectarian sentiments were in general on the rise and were becoming more crystalized under the weight of the Ottoman discriminatory practices in favor of Sunni Kurdish *ashiret* chiefs, material pursuits and interests continued to be one of the primary drives in socio-political considerations among different communities of the region. Shi'i landlords could as easily change nationalities as the Nestorian and Armenian villagers, when they thought they such an act could increase their chance of security of life and property and provide more accessible channels to material gain.

## **Chapter 5: The Borderlanders' Search for Land and Belonging under the Young Turk and Russian Occupations of Iranian Azerbaijan, 1908-1914**

The previous chapters examined the transformation of intercommunal relations among different religious communities inhabiting the northern stretch of the Ottoman-Iranian borderlands against the backdrop of increased Russo-Ottoman competition over

frontier security. The analysis was centered on the investigation of the impact of multiple processes, including politics of subjecthood, imperial frontier security concerns, and missionary activity and representations, on articulating and entrenching a culture of sectarianism in the discourse and in practice along the northern stretch of Ottoman-Iranian borderlands. Particular attention was paid to the examination of the gradual emergence of divergent visions of communal boundaries and representation in the context of mounting imperial competition over the regional groups' political loyalties and religious identities. The result was a spike in intercommunal violence, which was one of the primary agents conducive to the crystallization of communal boundaries on a sectarian basis. As it was demonstrated, the Ottoman state's anxieties over the security of East Anatolia's frontiers heightened in the 1890s in consequence of the frustrated Armenian leadership's adoption of violent struggle as a means to attract international attention. Intense fears over imperial frontier security in East Anatolia, further exacerbated by the tenuous links between the central state and the Kurdish tribes of the region, prompted Sultan Abdülhamid II to form select Kurdish tribes into regiments with special privileges. As intercommunal violence between Armenians and Kurds intensified, the Hamidiye chiefs exploited their privileged position to appropriate land by displacing poor Armenian and Kurdish peasants, thus drastically altering land ownership patterns. Their newly acquired wealth and power catapulted these Kurdish chiefs into a new set of power brokers. Such a development had far-reaching ramifications for intercommunal relations under the new regime in Istanbul as the entangled questions of the Hamidiye militias and the appropriated lands would ultimately call for mutually exclusive solutions.

Moreover, discussion also extended to the impact of the atrocities of the 1890s and the Hamidiye institution on the identity of the Iranian Kurds before the Hamidiye was replicated in rhetoric and practice in the occupied zone during the first phase of the

Iranian revolution. In some sense, the privileges offered by the Ottomans to the Iranian Kurds during the occupation constituted the extension of the Hamidiye into Iran. As the inhabitants of the porous Ottoman-Iranian frontiers, the Iranian Kurds also came to occupy an indispensable position on the Porte's agenda of strengthening frontier security. At the outset of the twentieth century, as Ottoman anxieties concerning the future possibility of Armenian and Russian threats increased, the Porte deployed the Hamidiye to its advantage in its border disputes with Iran. A weakened Iran, dominated by Russia, represented a grave threat to the Ottoman state. The solution sought by the sultan was to uproot the danger emanating through the disputed frontiers initially by increasing Ottoman influence among Sunni Kurds of Iran and later by outright annexation of the disputed districts.<sup>492</sup>

However, occupation of Iranian territory ultimately confronted the Porte with a similar set of unintended consequences associated with the creation of the Hamidiye and the agrarian question (the issue of returning appropriated Armenian lands to their original owners). Extension of similar incentives to Iranian Kurdish chiefs effected drastic changes in land ownership patterns, which would eventually drive a number of prominent Kurds into the Russian orbit. The occupation of Iranian territory, however, created a more complicated situation than that in East Anatolia. After all, the inhabitants of the occupied zone in Iran enjoyed a greater ethno-religious diversity and a more robust missionary presence among the Christian inhabitants. Iranian authority, weakened as it had become, nevertheless made powerful appeals to the identity of the Shi'i population in the form of the revolutionary *anjumans* under the influence of Caucasian intelligentsia and political

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<sup>492</sup> In a 1901 report from Naser al-Mulk to Iranian Foreign Ministry, the Iranian ambassador warned against the dramatic increase of Ottoman consuls' influence in Iranian Kurdistan, noting that in the last few years numerous Kurds had illegally obtained Ottoman citizenship papers and in collaboration with the Ottoman consul, Bekir Bey, had purchased arms and overshadowed the local government. See, Naser al-Mulk to Foreign Ministry, 12 Rabi' al-Sani 1319 H.Q. [June 29, 1901], *Guzidah-yi Asnad*, Vol. 5, 486.

activists. The existence of such multiple contending visions, emanating from various ideological sources, i.e. the foreign missions and consuls, *anjumans*, Armenian *fedayis*, Ottoman occupation authorities, and royalist tribal leaders confronted the borderlanders with enormous anxieties and ambiguities as each source of authority pulled them in a different direction. The clash of these visions was accompanied by the widespread use of physical and ideological violence as security structures broke down. Violence, in turn, hardened sectarian identities that slowly emerged over decades as Ottomans, Iranians, Russians, and Americans and the local community leaders engaged in politics of subjecthood and belonging through the medium of religion.

This chapter will continue narrating the intertwined stories of several Kurdish, Nestorian, and Azeri figures with different backgrounds and aspirations as part of the Russo-Ottoman imperial struggles for control of Iran's northwestern frontiers before World War I. As Michael Reynolds has suggested, the stories of these notables and community leaders were inextricably intertwined with the struggle for control of the Russo-Ottoman-Iranian borderlands and the transformation of imperial rule and identities in eastern Anatolia and Azerbaijan.<sup>493</sup> By taking this approach, this chapter seeks to demonstrate the complicated choices confronted by the borderland communities, during a transitory period from empires to nation-states, when the northern stretch of the frontiers turned into a site of imperial contestation and competing national and sectarian identities under Ottoman and Russian occupation regimes in Azerbaijan.

Through narrating the divergent stories of different actors and their competition for resources on both sides of the border, this chapter will further argue that episodes of sectarian violence in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, closely intertwined as they

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<sup>493</sup> Reynolds, "Abdurrezzak Bedirhan," 414.

were with pursuits of material resources, laid the grounds for the massive sectarian-nationalist violence between Muslim and Christian communities during World War I. By the second decade of the twentieth century, through a combination of the contentious agrarian question in East Anatolia and the persistent violence attending the alteration of land tenure patterns under Ottoman occupation of northwestern Iran, Armenian, Kurdish, Nestorian, and Azeri communities would occupy irreconcilable perspectives and communal aspirations, which were inexorably tied to material pursuits. The dissonance informing the competing imperial visions for the region and rival communal aspirations would over time become too contradictory to be easily reconciled. The resultant struggle, as Michael Reynolds has masterfully shown, “shattered the empires, and the empires in turn shattered the peoples in their borderlands, uprooting them, fracturing their societies, and sending untold numbers to death.”<sup>494</sup>

#### **THE OCCUPIED DISTRICTS UNDER THE COMMITTEE OF UNION AND PROGRESS:**

In July 1908, the Ottoman Empire also experienced a revolution. The leadership of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) restored the constitution that had been abrogated by Abdülhamid II in 1877. The impact of the July 1908 constitutional revolution in Istanbul, which led to marked changes in the political and ideological structures of the Ottoman government under the CUP regime, reverberated in the borderlands of East Anatolia and the occupied districts in Iran as well. However, it took some time for any such impact to reach the margins of the empire. In fact, in July and August of 1908, Tahir Pasha, the head of the Ottoman border commission, took a more assertive stance by stipulating that sectarian differences should form the “principle on which the division of territory should be based, Sunnis being Turkish and Shias

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<sup>494</sup> Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, 1.

Persian.”<sup>495</sup> The Ottoman commissioner followed up his declaration by taking practical steps. He informed the Sunni villagers scattered about the plain of Urmia to expect the extension of Ottoman sovereignty. The first target of his integrative efforts was the district of Anzal, which stretched from Somai to the lake and conveniently contained a number of Sunni villages.

In a comment on the occupation mechanisms pursued by the Ottomans, British consul Wratislaw noted that the Kurds who “prepare the way for them [Ottomans], have already begun to inform the inhabitants of Anzal that they are annexed to Turkey, and must give in their submission.”<sup>496</sup> When confronted by Muhtasham on the subject, Tahir Pasha of course repudiated the claim that there were any intrigues involved. Similarly, in August 1908, Yaver Pasha, accompanied by Ismail Agha and Omer Agha Shikak and a number of Ottoman regular troops, advanced to the Sunni village of Kulinji in Anzal, located on the main road connecting Urmia to Salmas. From there, the Ottoman officer dispatched letters to the surrounding villages, ordering them to expel their *mubashirs* (landlords’ agents) and to receive Ottoman tithe-collectors. As the occupation gradually advanced in this manner, the Ottoman border commissioners did not waver in their efforts to convince their Iranian counterparts to voluntarily call for extension of Ottoman sovereignty as a deterrence against the ongoing persecution of Sunnis.<sup>497</sup>

With the regime change in Istanbul, however, some modifications gradually took place in the occupied zone. Just as the Young Turk revolution was set in motion in July, according to an article in the *Times*, “the Turkish Government has admitted, in reference to the Turco-Persian frontier dispute, that the occupation by Turkish troops of districts

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<sup>495</sup> Wratislaw to Marling, Urumia, July 12, 1908, *Schofield IV*, 339.

<sup>496</sup> Ibid.

<sup>497</sup> Wratislaw to Marling, Urumia, August 10, 1908, *Schofield IV*, 340.



lying outside the disputed zone is unjustifiable and has made the chief Turkish delegate on the frontier, Tahir Pasha ... responsible for the strict observation of the boundaries of the disputed zone, at the same time ordering him to withdraw the Turkish forces from territory which is indisputably Persian"<sup>498</sup> On August 27, Tahir Pasha was recalled to his post in Bitlis. In the same month, it was reported that a considerable number of troops had been withdrawn from Mergawar and Tergawar.<sup>499</sup> Simultaneously, declarations of solidarity by the Young Turk leaders rekindled hopes that Istanbul would cease its infringements of Iranian territory.<sup>500</sup> This, however, remained a hope to be fulfilled as such declarations of solidarity did not translate into what Iranians wished for. On their retiring to Van, Ottoman military commanders instructed their Kurdish protégés to resist any Iranian efforts to reoccupy the annexed territories entrusted to them. In the same month, in Anzal, when Iranian troops appeared in order to confirm the news of the purported Ottoman withdrawal, the remaining Ottoman officers issued stern warnings against any irredentist attempts by Iranians.<sup>501</sup>

The Ottoman constitutional revolution of July coincided with the bombardment of the parliament by the shah in Tehran, which led to a series of conflicts between the royalists and constitutionalist factions inside Tabriz and the outlying country and towns in Maragheh, Khoi, and Salmas. In November 1908, the constitutionalist forces temporarily prevailed in Tabriz and Maragheh, which led to the restoration of the *anjumans* power in Salmas, Khoi, and Urmia in December 1908.<sup>502</sup> A coalition of

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<sup>498</sup> "The Turco-Persian Frontier." *Times* [London, England] 29 June 1908: 7. *The Times Digital Archive*. Accessed on 5 April 2018.

<sup>499</sup> Wratislaw to Lowther Urumia, August 21, 1908, *Schofield IV*, 341.

<sup>500</sup> Browne, *Persian Revolution*, 250.

<sup>501</sup> Situation on Turco-Persian Frontier, Reduction of Forces, Renewed Kurdish Outrages, Wratislaw to Marling, Urumia, September 24, 1908, *Schofield IV*, 346.

<sup>502</sup> Wratislaw to Marling, Tabriz, November 18, 1908, (FO 248/944), 291. On December 7, 1908, the *mujahidin* forces, led by Agha Mirza Nurallah, Quchali Khan, and the noted Caucasian revolutionary,

*mujahidin* forces, Dashnakists, and the Caucasian Social Democrats also soundly defeated the royalists led by Samad Khan Sa'id al-Mulk from Maraghah. At the same time, encouraging news of the establishment of the Center for Union and Progress of the Nation by Iranian émigré activists in Istanbul along with the positive coverage of the resistance of Tabriz by the Ottoman journal *Sabah* kindled hopes among the Iranian revolutionaries of Azerbaijan about the Unionist regime's new policies vis-à-vis the occupation.<sup>503</sup> In Urmia, the election of the local *anjuman* took place on the initiative of Muhtasham, "but it is a colorless Assembly and not likely to last for long."<sup>504</sup> Further north in Salmas and Khoi, where Kurdish tribes furnished the khan of Maku a formidable fighting force against the revolutionaries, the conflict had raged on with heavy casualties on both sides. Armenian *fedayis* figured strongly among the revolutionaries, leading the Ottoman occupation forces to watch the events closely. As Russia gathered troops in the north, Ottoman forces also assembled in Salmas and occupied Kohenh Shahr, a district in Salmas, on the pretext of protecting Ottoman subjects. Amidst the conflict, when the revolutionaries were driven to desperation under persistent assaults from the Kurdish forces of the khan of Maku, a deputation from Salmas applied to the Ottoman *kaimakam* of Chahriq for Ottoman protection and nationality. However, a turn in the fortunes of the war in favor of the revolutionaries led them to withdraw the request.<sup>505</sup>

Thus, by the end of 1908, it was clear that not only had not the Ottoman occupation been reversed but rather, on the contrary, it was being taken to a new level. Nevertheless, developments in East Anatolia under the new regime in Istanbul, which had

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Heydar Khan Amu Oghli stormed the castle of Khoi, forcing out Amir Amjad of Maku. See a report from Khoi by Ja'far al-Husayni, published in *Rūznāmah-i 'anjuman-i Tabrīz*, Vo. II, (Tihiran: Kitābkhānah-i Millī-i Jumhūrī-i Islāmī-i Īrān bā hamkāri-i Ustāndārī-i Āzarbāyijān-i Sharqī, 1374-75 [1995-97]), 900.

<sup>503</sup> *Rūznāmah-i 'anjuman-i Tabrīz*, Chap-i 1, Vol. II, (Tihiran: Kitābkhānah-i Millī-i Jumhūrī-i Islāmī-i Īrān bā hamkāri-i Ustāndārī-i Āzarbāyijān-i Sharqī, 1374), 919 and 946.

<sup>504</sup> Wratislaw to Barclay, Tabriz, December 2, 1908, (FO 248/944), 315.

<sup>505</sup> Ibid.

come to power on the promises of equality of all subjects without distinction of religion, were bound to have a profound effect on the occupation movement in Iran. The Unionist regime had moved against the Hamidiye chiefs with the intention of resolving Kurdish-Armenian differences through disbanding the reviled Hamidiye regiments. In the Hakkari district of Van, the Hamidiye chiefs of the frontier had joined the royalist forces of the Ikbal al-Saltaneh, the khan of Maku, and Simko Agha of Shikak in raiding and massacring the villagers of Salmas and Khoi. According to the vice-consul of Van Captain Dickson, the participation of the Hamidiye chiefs of Hakkari on the royalist side against the Iranian revolutionaries, urged the Unionist leaders to extend their efforts to complete the delayed process of disbanding the Hamidiye regiments in Van.<sup>506</sup>

In February 1909, a certain Naji Bey and Mustafa Bey, delegates of the CUP from Salonica, and an Iranian revolutionist by the name of Agha Mirza Sa'id Salmasi began to coordinate efforts with a certain Samson, an Armenian Dashnak *fedayi*. Their alleged mission was to protect the districts of Khoi and Salmas against the royalist forces led by Ikabal al-Saltaneh and Simko Agha.<sup>507</sup> In early March, as the Russian occupation of Tabriz loomed ever larger on the horizon, three Young Turk bands and two *mujahidin* forces under Halil Effendi crossed over into Iran through the strategic pass of Kotur and engaged the royalists in battle. Deploying an emergent rhetoric that recast traditional loyalty and faith in God and religion to the patriotic notion of the motherland, the Iranian *mujahidin* and their Unionist comrades declared their fallen men martyrs for the cause of the revolution and salvation of the eternal nation. The report from the Young Turk-led expedition, authored by Ali Asghar Muhammadzadeh and published in the *anjuman* journal, portrayed the conflict against Ikbal al-Dowleh's forces as one between fighters

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<sup>506</sup> Dickson to Lowther, Van, February 24, 1909, *Schofield IV*, 354.

<sup>507</sup> Dickson to Lowther, Van, February 24, 1909, *Schofield IV*, 354.

waging a war of liberation of Iran against “the army of Zahhak-loving despotism.” The freedom-fighters’ heroism, the author asserted, would receive praise from “the resplendent graves of the martyrs of the struggle for freedom, Haji Ibrahim Agha, Malik al-Mutakallimin and Mirza Jahangir Khan [alias Sur-i Israfil].”<sup>508</sup> The report continued to extol the Young Turks for their heroic assistance to their Iranian revolutionary comrades, wistfully wishing that Enver Bey and Niazi Bey were present “to witness such a gallant movement of the free [dar tamasha-yi *junbish-i ghayuranah-yi ahrar*]” and to observe that “from every single drop of the blood of the honorable martyr, Midhat Pasha, thousands of mature youths had entered the arena of humanity and had united to uproot despotism.”<sup>509</sup> As Benedict Anderson has suggested, in this phase, clearly the religious concept of sacrifice and salvation was giving way to that of the imagined community of the enduring Iranian nation, which called for “a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning.”<sup>510</sup> In a radical transformation of the borderlands into a site of revolutionary fraternity, extending from Istanbul to Tabriz, the Shikak Kurds of Somai led by Omer Agha (son of Muhammad Sharif Beg), under the Unionists’ influence, also lent support to the revolutionaries at Sofian and received praise from the Tabriz *anjuman*’s journal.<sup>511</sup>

However, such a united front between Ottoman and Iranian revolutionaries proved fragile as the efforts to assist the Iranian revolutionaries turned out to have been more in keeping with the new policy of the Unionist regime to extend the occupation further afield in order to prevent Russia from gaining a stronger foothold in Azerbaijan.

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<sup>508</sup> *Rūznāmah-i Anjuman-i Tabrīz*, 2:980.

<sup>509</sup> *Rūznāmah-i Anjuman-i Tabrīz*, 2:981.

<sup>510</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2006, 11.

<sup>511</sup> *Rūznāmah-i Anjuman-i Tabrīz*, 2:983.

Ottoman troops had already responded to the petition of the inhabitants of Kuhneh Shahr in Salmas and occupied the place, while in the plains of Urmia and Solduz, Kurdish and Ottoman forces had resumed their annexation efforts. During this time, with the Iranian revolutionaries of Tabriz remaining under a royalist siege, the Ottomans justified extension of their occupation by offering private assurances of support to the revolutionaries. Such pledges consisted of aiding the revolutionaries of Salmas and Khoi and commissioning the Kurds of Savujbulagh to create a diversion in the rear of the royalist forces of Samad Khan, later to be known as Shuja' al-Dowleh.<sup>512</sup>

Meanwhile, Muhtasham, the head of the boundary commission, had managed to carry on as governor of Urmia until March 1909 through making cross-alliances with Kurdish chiefs and the khan of Maku, the Russian vice-consul, and certain members of the Urmia *anjuman*. When the royalist forces' capture of Tabriz seemed imminent in early March as the blockade of Tabriz tightened, Muhtasham took measures to reestablish the shah's authority over that of the *anjuman* in Urmia. Earlier in February, the struggle between the governor and the *anjuman* had led the Ottoman vice-consul, Petros Agha, to call in reinforcement of troops in order "to protect Turkish subjects." However, through the *anjuman*'s protests to the Russian vice-consul, the foreign missions, and Hamdi Bey, the acting Ottoman consul at Khoi, promises had been made for their withdrawal pending the removal of danger to Ottoman subjects.<sup>513</sup> On March 3, 1909, a report from Urmia, which was published in the Tabriz *anjuman* journal, spoke of disturbances created by "a group of traitors to the nation and the bootlickers of despotism, the majority of whom are from the ruling elites, notables, and land-owners, in other words, the pernicious insects of the societal body [*hasharat-i muzirrah-i hay'at-i ijtimai'iyah*] and the disgracers of the

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<sup>512</sup> Wratislaw to Barclay, Tabriz, January 20, 1909 (FO 248/974), 187.

<sup>513</sup> Wratislaw to Barclay, Tabriz, February 19, 1909 (FO 248/974), 222.

noble Iranian nation [*qawm-i najib-i Irani*].”<sup>514</sup> Apparently, the propertied notables of Urmia had financed the establishment of their own regiment from the roughs of the town under the command of Musa Agha Sadr and Haji Hishamt Nizam. The new regiment was named the *mujahidin* of Mohammad Ali Shah. In an explicitly socialist interpretation of the conflict, the author, having poured scorn on the notables for their “inane” counter-revolutionary attempts, stated that in a stark turnaround of events, the peasants of the countryside stormed into town in droves of thousands and forced the “traitors” into hiding or flight. There was also a sense of danger that the peasants would take to revengeful looting of the city notables’ houses and property.<sup>515</sup>

In April 1909, a coalition of the *anjuman* forces of Salmas, assisted by the Shikak Kurds of Somai, Armenian *fedayis*, and Ottoman troops declared their intention to march on Tabriz to lift the siege on the city. In order to consolidate their power and increase their chances of success in Tabriz, the *anjuman*-appointed governor of Salmas, Sa’id al-Mamalik [alias Amir-i Hishmat], sent a force to occupy Urmia and to oust the royalist governor, Muhtasham. The dispatched troops consisted of Armenian *fedayis* and Tergawar Nestorians under a Catholic Nestorian leader, Faramarz Khan (alias Faramarz Begov). They entered Urmia amidst cheers and took Muhtasham and other members of the boundary commission and a number of the local nobility into custody and ignominiously escorted them out to Salmas where they remained in confinement until the fall of Tabriz in May 1909. The Ottoman Unionists, who had influenced the course of events by allying themselves with the constitutionalists, further exerted their influence in the capture of Urmia through dispatching a band of the Somai Shikaks to form a police

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<sup>514</sup> *Rūznāmah-i ‘i Anjuman-i Tabrīz*, 2:975.

<sup>515</sup> *Rūznāmah-i ‘i Anjuman-i Tabrīz*, 2:975.

force inside Urmia to keep order.<sup>516</sup> Through buttressing the efforts of the Salmas *anjuman* revolutionaries, the Ottomans pursued the double objective of staving off an impending Russian intervention in Tabriz while simultaneously seeking to consolidate their authority over Urmia by cutting off the city's communications from the north (in Salmas) and the south (Savujbulagh).

From March 25 until May 15, 1909, Urmia remained under “a revolutionary (or Nationalist) dictatorship.” Sa'id al-Mamalik's reign was marked by popular celebrations. The district's landlords and other propertied notables ‘voluntarily’ made contributions to save further financial loss or did so under duress.<sup>517</sup> Others who feared a similar fate applied for *dikhalat* and hoisted the Ottoman flag. The man of the hour, who orchestrated the regime change and profited from the business of selling Ottoman nationality certificates, was the versatile Agha Petros. As a representative of the Ottoman state with broad powers and high prestige in the region, he acknowledged the landlords' rights by reminding the public that they were under Ottoman protection and thus immune from prosecution by the new regime in power. The Russian consul also countered such extension of Ottoman influence by also offering Russia protection to petitioners. The Russian vice-consul made a point of reminding the public that tsarist troops had crossed the border into Iran to protect those associated with his government. His efforts apparently proved successful in dissuading more landlords from jumping on the bandwagon of seeking Ottoman protection.<sup>518</sup>

When news of a looming Russian occupation of Tabriz crept into Urmia, Sa'id al-Mamalik responded by dispatching several hundred *fedayis* to reinforce those of Khoi

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<sup>516</sup> Report on the Political Condition of the Country and the Relations of the Missionary Work to Them by William A. Shedd, 1909, p. 1, (PHS).

<sup>517</sup> Ibid. 1.

<sup>518</sup> Ibid., 2.

in the relief of Tabriz. They were badly defeated, however with many being massacred by the tribesmen of the notorious Rahim Khan Chalabianlu.<sup>519</sup> In the wake of such a severe blow to the prestige of the revolutionaries, agitations were soon afoot against Sa'id al-Mamalik in Urmia. Mashahadi Bagher, the leader of the pro-sharia faction of the *anjuman* featuring the propertied classes, led the protests against the governor. The socialist-inclined governor's levying of heavy contributions on the wealthy residents of Urmia had ruffled rubbed the notables the wrong way.<sup>520</sup>

As it turned out, following a series of skirmishes, dissident notables took refuge in the largest mosque in town. Soon another revolt broke out, leading to the ouster of Sa'id al-Mamalik. Agha Petros stepped in again to protect the fugitive governor by turning the situation into an occasion for the display of Ottoman power and personal gain. This time, Agha Petros offered Ottoman protection in advocacy of the Iranian constitutionalists. However, according to American missionary Shedd, Sa'id al-Mamalik's transfer of funds and property to the Ottomans as part of the deal for his protection "did ten times more in Urmia to set people against the Constitutional cause than all the exhortations and machinations of the reactionary party."<sup>521</sup> This merely reflects the missionary view of the events as Sa'id al-Mamalik would later return to Tabriz to be appointed as the chief of police in town under the new governor, Mukhbir al-Saltaneh.<sup>522</sup>

The flight of Sa'id al-Mamalik from the city provided the opportunity for looting by some parties including the Shikak Kurds, who had been posted as an Ottoman force to keep order. In the skirmishes that ensued, Mashahdi Bagher also called in Kurdish

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<sup>519</sup> Wratislaw to Barclay, Tabriz, May 28, 1909 (FO 248/974), 365.

<sup>520</sup> Ibid.

<sup>521</sup> Report on the Political Condition of the Country and the Relations of the Missionary Work to Them by William A. Shedd, 1909, p. 1, (PHS).

<sup>522</sup> Mahdī Qulī Hidayat, *Khāṭirāt va khaṭarāt: tūshah-ī az tārikh-i shish pādishāh va gūshah-ī az dawrah-i zindagī-i man*, Chāp-i 2 (Tihiran: Kitābfurūshī-i Zavvār, 1344), 214.



auxiliaries to his aid, something that the British consul at Tabriz put down as “an unpleasant sign of the general demoralization.”<sup>523</sup> With the ouster of Sa’id al-Mamalik the Ottoman authorities’ endeavors to consolidate their influence over the city floundered as Russia tightened its hold over the eastern stretches of the province of Azerbaijan. The arrival of a deputation from Urmia with complaints against Kurdish depredations and Ottoman encroachments and their request for the reappointment of Muhtasham as governor testified to this dramatic turnaround.<sup>524</sup> The temporary alliance between the Ottoman authorities and the Iranian revolutionaries broke down even further when the Ottoman consul of Khoi’s offer of protection to a Kurd led to an armed encounter between the Ottoman consul’s troops and the noted Iranian-Caucasian nationalist, Heydar Khan Amu Oghli, the acting governor of Salmas.<sup>525</sup>

#### **RUSSO-OTTOMAN COMPETITION FOR SUPREMACY AND THE RACE FOR LAND IN THE BORDERLANDS:**

Such complications in the occupied zone coincided with a coup and a countercoup in Istanbul in July 1909. A resurgent CUP came back to power, extending martial law and embarking on an increasingly dictatorial and Turkish nationalist path. With the CUP leaders in firm control of the imperial capital, which coincided with Russia’s dominance over northeastern parts of Iranian Azerbaijan, including Tabriz, frontier security concerns assumed a new sense of urgency. Against this background, both the Ottomans and the Russians began to tread more carefully even as they intensified efforts to entrench their hegemony in the Iranian province. Among the reforms the Ottoman authorities implemented, one was to replace Agha Petros with “a regularly accredited Turkish vice-

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<sup>523</sup> Wratislaw to Barclay, Tabriz, May 28, 1909 (FO 248/974), 366.

<sup>524</sup> Wratislaw to Barclay, Tabriz, June 9, 1909 (FO 248/974), 362.

<sup>525</sup> Wratislaw to Barclay, Tabriz, June 11, 1909 (FO 248/974), 367.

consul” as pressures from Russia and Britain mounted against his efforts to obtain more *dikhalats*.<sup>526</sup> The Ottomans also temporarily withdrew a number of their troops from the villages in the vicinity of Urmia even. These measures, however, went in tandem with their extension of the occupation further afield elsewhere in the southern districts of Savujbulagh and Solduz where Kurdish tribal power was more firmly controlled by the Ottomans.

Russian authorities adopted a similar course in that they also sought to increase their influence indirectly through cultivating allies from among the Christian and the Kurdish population of the borderland region. However, the Russians were less forthcoming in their efforts, fearing unnecessary entanglements in the border disputes with the Ottomans. M.S. Lazarev mentions that shortly after the Young Turk revolution in Istanbul, a number of Kurdish chiefs, including Ismail Agha Shikak of Suranava, Seman Khan Mamash, and Kurdo Beg of Dasht went over to the Russian vice-consul in Urmia in August 1908 to ask for protection. The Russian vice-consul, Boris Miller, however, had reminded them that they were Iranian subjects and must renew their allegiance to the Iranian government.<sup>527</sup> According to Walter A. Smart, the British consul at Tabriz, “The Russian pretension to protect all Orthodox Christians at Urmia often involves them in difficulties.”<sup>528</sup> A year later, in August 1909, such a difficulty arose. The Begzadeh Kurds of Dasht clashed with the Russian consular guards over the Nestorian village of Mar Sergis. However, Miller pulled back the troops after they suffered minor casualties. To repair the tarnished Russian prestige and due to objections from Iranian authorities for the use of Russian troops, Miller instead dispatched armed Syrians against

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<sup>526</sup> Report on the Political Condition of the Country and the Relations of the Missionary Work to Them by William A. Shedd, 1909, (PHS), 2.

<sup>527</sup> Lazarev, *Keshey Kurd*, 271.

<sup>528</sup> Smart to Barclay, Tabreez, September 15, 1909, *Schofield IV*, 378.

the Kurdish squatters.<sup>529</sup> Fearing further complications in a volatile region, higher Russian authorities castigated Miller for his lack of prudence in deploying Russian troops against Kurds. Soon afterwards, the Russian authorities at Tabriz reinforced the consular guard in Urmia but not before having replaced Miller with a more conciliatory Preobrajensky as vice-consul.<sup>530</sup>

By mid-1909, having failed to prop up the Iranian revolutionaries as a deterrence against Russian intervention, the Ottomans fell back on their former policy of relying primarily on Kurdish loyalty to expand and to maintain the occupation. Similarly, Russia, having established firm control over the eastern parts of Azerbaijan and Tabriz, sought to exert its influence over the Nestorian Christian community to stymie entrenchment of Ottoman control across the Salmas, Urmia, and Solduz plains. In this respect, foreign missions, especially the Russian Orthodox one, became instrumental in cultivating ties between the Christian communities and the Russian administration. Established in 1898, the Russian Orthodox mission represented the realization of the great power support the Nestorian communities had sought since their initial contacts with foreign missionaries in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. As Samuel Wilson, an American missionary in Tabriz, noted, the Nestorians expected “redress of wrongs, protection from oppressions of their landlords, from exactions of Persian officials, and the fanaticism of the Mohammedan priests and populace.”<sup>531</sup> And for that they looked to Russia as the Tsarist imperial power became ever farther projected into Iran from the Caucasus. The Russian Orthodox mission formed an integral part of this Russian projection of power and advancement of foreign

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<sup>529</sup> Smart to Barclay, Tabriz, August 29, 1909 (FO 248/974), 434.

<sup>530</sup> M. S Lazarev, *Kêşey Kurd: 1896-1917*, trans. Kawus Qeftan, vol. 1 (Baghdād: Maṭba‘at al-Jāhiz, 1989), 271–72.

<sup>531</sup> Samuel G. Wilson, “Conversion of the Nestorians of Persia to the Russian Church,” 751.

policy.<sup>532</sup> From its inception, an energetic and domineering Russian archimandrite, Hieromonk Sergius, presided over the mission. His machinations and meddlesome behavior played a marked role in straining intercommunal relations between Muslims and Christians in the region as he often aggressively interfered in political affairs on behalf of the Nestorian community. Since the Russian mission was directly installed and instructed by the Tsar, the archimandrite enjoyed a free hand notwithstanding consular opposition. In fact, Sergius was reported to have often overshadowed Russian vice-consuls in Urmia in deploying Russian imperial power in the service of furthering missionary propaganda and work. In 1911 and 1912, the archimandrite left no doubt in the minds of the populace and the Ottomans about the mission's political agenda when he visited Mar Shimun in Hakkari in order to secure his conversion to Orthodoxy and his pledge of allegiance to the Russian Empire.<sup>533</sup> A year after the archimandrite's visits, MacGillivray of the Anglican mission reported that the Nestorians of Hakkari had developed an inflated sense of themselves following Sergius' tour of the Nestorian mountains. "The latter's journey here last summer and his lavish promises so excited the Syrians that they have been talking very big and exasperating the Kurds."<sup>534</sup>

With respect to other foreign missions, prior to the Russian occupation of Tabriz in May 1909, they had a hard time dealing with the competing ideological and political forces vying for authority through controlling property and sectarian and political loyalties. Such competition created a dilemma for foreign missionaries as they strove to distance themselves from political entanglements. Thus, for instance, in spite of their avowed commitment to political neutrality, the American missionaries found themselves

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<sup>532</sup> Gaunt, Beṭ-Şawoce, and Donef, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors*, 90.

<sup>533</sup> Lazarev, *Kêşey Kurd*, 1:166–67.

<sup>534</sup> Molyneux-Seel to Lowther, Van, May 19, 1913, no. 13, *Records of the Kurds*, Vol. 4, 555.

in a confounding situation where they had to simultaneously make representations to multiple parties on behalf of their Protestant flock. Their situation was not unique. Such dilemmas were reflective of the complicated and ambiguous choices faced by all the inhabitants of the borderlands alike.

Shedd's concerns were representative. In his 1909 report, the American missionary confessed that "The interests of our mission and still more those of the native Protestant community have compelled us in one way or another to have dealings with the government and fedais, Russians and Turks. Even when the dealings are social, expressions of opinion or refusal to express opinion cannot but have political implications."<sup>535</sup> As an example of political involvement, Shedd provided a series of intriguing situations in which multiple sources of authority overlapped. For instance, in 1908, a native priest of the Nestorian village of Gavilan was robbed. Under normal circumstances, such a case would have been addressed by the Iranian *karguzar*. However, since real power rested with Ottoman authorities, the Ottoman vice-consul was applied to for redress. It is also likely that the Nestorians were encouraged in their appeal to Agha Petros as he was a member of their own community. The wronged priest did not personally take action, but other residents of his village, seeking to rid themselves of their oppressive Shi'i landlord, went ahead and gave *dikhalat*. At the same time, the landlord, who had run into trouble with the authorities in the confusion of administrative affairs amidst the revolution, also gave *dikhalat*, thus complicating the matter further. Shedd did not mention what transpired afterwards but suggested that Agha Petros would have been delighted to obtain a *dikhalat* from the priest as well in order to adjudicate the case and to profit from it. In a different case, Shedd bypassed the Ottoman authorities through having

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<sup>535</sup> Report on the Political Condition of the Country and the Relations of the Missionary Work to Them by William A. Shedd, 1909, (PHS), p. 2.

Mar Shimun settle the matter. His action irked the Ottomans, who charged him with interference in political matters.<sup>536</sup> The criticism was not misplaced as Shedd himself confessed, “We have been regarded as anti-Turkish and there is a measure of truth in the charge. Turkish occupation has seemed to me the least desirable of several possible results.” In a remark that revealed where his sympathies lay, he noted that a permanent Ottoman occupation would cut off the region as a frontier province by natural barriers from the rest of the Ottoman Empire and “by political boundaries from Azerbaijan to which it naturally belongs.”<sup>537</sup>

Contrasting the potential positive outcomes that could emerge from the Iranian revolutionary movement to the imposed irregularities of the Ottoman occupation, Shedd observed that the American mission needed to tread carefully in dealing with Russian authorities. The Iranian revolutionary movement, he maintained, was opposed to foreign intervention, and thus, it was advisable for the mission not to be identified with the Russian intervention. However, since the Russians sought redress for the Nestorian communities the American mission had been evangelizing for some seventy years, it is hard to imagine how the missionaries could have completely dissociated themselves from the Russian authorities. For instance, when Mehmed Beg of the Begzadeh tribe claimed ownership the Nestorian village of Mar Sergis a few miles from Urmia, appeal to Ottoman authorities did not produce the desired results. The Russian consul, however, took practical steps by dispatching consular guards to expel the Kurdish chief. As representatives of a Cristian power, the Russian authorities readily found favor with the American missionaries even as the Russian archimandrite Sergius’ hostile attitude proved a hard challenge at times. Thus, Shedd noted that although the American mission

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<sup>536</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>537</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

acknowledged that under Ottoman occupation the Kurds have been restrained somewhat, but “we owe much more to the Russians and I have no doubt that the withdrawal of their consular guard of 150 men would mean an increase in disorder.”<sup>538</sup> Lavishing praise on the Russians for their restraint and lack of intervention in the affairs of the region, Shedd called attention to the importance of keeping “on good terms with Russian officials.”<sup>539</sup>

Meanwhile, the Ottoman occupation extended to other Sunni Kurdish parts of Iran further south to include Savujbulagh, Saqiz, Bukan, and Baneh in 1911. In this same year, Salar al-Dowleh (1881-1961), a younger brother of the deposed shah, made a series of efforts to seize back control of the monarchy. In May 1911, he crossed the frontier into Solduz with the aim of mobilizing the Kurds to march on Tabriz, making proclamations about enjoying Ottoman support.<sup>540</sup> Miller, the Russian consul at Tabriz believed that Salar’s endeavors were connived at by the Ottomans to advance their own interests in the border region. The British consul also maintained that, regardless of Russian suspicions, this situation “could have hardly arisen except for the anomalous position on the frontier.”<sup>541</sup> Such misgivings about the Ottomans’ intrigues prompted the Russians to tighten their control over Azerbaijan further by appointing their staunch ally and notorious anti-constitutionalist Samad Khan Shuja’ al-Saltaneh as governor-general of the province.

Meanwhile, heightened criticism of the Porte’s occupation, combined with an Italian takeover of Tripolitania, the last Ottoman province in Africa, prompted the Ottomans to approach Iranian authorities with the offer of a new round of negotiations. When these overtures did not materialize due to Iran’s persistent demands for Istanbul’s

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<sup>538</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>539</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>540</sup> Iranian Foreign Ministry to Ottoman Embassy, May 4, 1911, *Guzidah-i Asnad*, Vol. 7, 529.

<sup>541</sup> Shipley to Barclay, Tabriz, May 11, 1911 (FO 248/1038).

immediate evacuation of the occupied region, Russia and Britain formed a joint 'independent' commission to examine the extent of the Ottoman occupation, its administrative structure, the attitude of the inhabitants, and the *de facto* frontier in 1905.<sup>542</sup>

The 'independent' commission led by the Russian consul of Tabriz, Avalon Shipley, and the second dragoman of the Russian embassy at Istanbul and later famed scholar of Iranian studies, Vladimir Minorsky, toured the region from the northern districts of Khoi and Salmas to Baneh in the south and provided a wealth of information on the region and its inhabitants and topographical features such as had never been accomplished before. Whatever the purpose behind the Shipley-Minorsky reports, the evidence they presented clearly showed that the Ottoman occupation had drastically altered social realities. The commissioners noted that the occupation zone was divided into two parts under the superintendence of staff officers [*erkan-i harbi*], from Van and Mosul, in the administration of which Ottoman consuls of Khoi and Savujbulagh also took part. Turkish officers manned military outposts of the northern districts at Chahriq, Mawana, and Ushnu. Due to a lack of staff, the civil functions of governance had fallen to local Kurdish chiefs. For instance, Karim Khan Herki of Tergawar had been appointed the honorary *mudir* of Anzal, while in the Bilbas territory, Paiz Pasha Mamash and Agha Baiz Mangur fulfilled similar administrative functions in their territories in Tirkesh, and Vezneh.<sup>543</sup>

In terms of laws and regulations, nowhere was the Ottoman code in effect, except in certain Shi'i-dominated districts such as Solduz. Civil cases were judged according to

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<sup>542</sup> Barclay to Grey, Tehran, April 28, 1911, *Schofield IV*, 473.

<sup>543</sup> Joint report by Messrs Shipley and Minorsky, British and Russian Delegates, on the state of affairs on the Turco-Persian frontier, June 8th-September 16th, 1911, *Schofield IV*, 552.



the *sharia* by mullahs and judges sent from Ottoman Kurdistan, both on account of their familiarity with Ottoman laws and with the view “to aid in the propagation of Turkish ideas.”<sup>544</sup> Serious criminal and political cases were handled by the authorities of Van or Kirkuk. A number of schools had also been opened and run by certain Kurdish agents of the Committee of Union and Progress, who sought to cultivate Unionist sympathies among the population, especially those of Savujbulagh.<sup>545</sup>

Ottoman policy in the occupation zone varied in accordance with the religious makeup of the districts brought under control. The Shipley-Minorsky reports suggested that due to a lack of existing administrative structures and because of the special nature of the Ottoman occupation, Ottoman authorities had adopted a special policy. This special policy made for a clear distinction between “the districts belonging to the Persian landowners or inhabited by Shiah (Sulduz, Baranduz, and Salmas) and those held by the ashiret Kurds (Shekaks, Bilbas, Mukris, etc).”<sup>546</sup> The commissioners observed that in the Shi’i majority districts, Ottoman policy was directed towards “the undermining of the power enjoyed by the landowners while under the Persians, and the emancipation of the “rayets”,” the object being that Ottoman authorities sought to create “a new class of population to which the idea of a return to the old regime should be repugnant.”<sup>547</sup> Thus, in the Karapapakh-controlled districts of Dashtebil and Dol in Solduz and elsewhere in Anzal, the new administrators seemed to have allowed Sunni Kurdish notables to displace the original land owners. Similarly, even when the original proprietors had been permitted to stay, their efforts at collection of property dues had been severely curtailed. It was noted that this was done with the aim of creating sympathy for continued Ottoman

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<sup>544</sup> Ibid., 553.

<sup>545</sup> Ibid., 553.

<sup>546</sup> Ibid., 554.

<sup>547</sup> Ibid., 554.

rule among the subject classes and to present an enviable example for those remaining outside the occupation zone.

The commissioners also reported of displays of loyalty and allegiance with the Ottomans in the form of processions with Ottoman flags and chants of “Long Live the Sultan.” While such demonstrations of support were more boldly exhibited in the majority Sunni districts, there were similar spectacles and expressions of satisfaction elsewhere. For instance, when the commissioners passed through Solduz, they noticed that certain Nestorian and Armenian inhabitants also spoke positively of the new order, highlighting its merits, including reduced tax rates and an increased degree of security against Kurdish raids. The joint commissioners were, however, dismissive of such positive attitudes and claimed that such shows of support were either staged by the Ottomans or stemmed from the material gains that had accrued to the inhabitants in the recent years. Similarly, they cast doubt on the authenticity of the *mazbatas* (petitions for Ottoman protection) submitted by the indigenous population as they were written in good Ottoman Turkish, a language that was not used by the local inhabitants.<sup>548</sup>

In their own turn, the Ottoman authorities also accused the British and Russian commissioners of producing false reports and sabotaging their established order by instigating the Kurds to defy Ottoman authority. Regardless of Ottoman suspicions, however, it is clear that not everyone was satisfied with the new administration.<sup>549</sup> For instance, the Shi’i Karapapakh khans strongly resisted the occupation due to the new administrators’ discriminatory practices in favors of Kurdish chiefs or their own subjects. Dissatisfaction ran high among certain Kurdish chiefs as well. Ismail Agha Simko was case in point. As the chief of the Avdoi Shikak, Ismail Agha Simko was firmly

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<sup>548</sup> Ateş, *Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands*, 272-75.

<sup>549</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

established at Kotur, enjoying “a position almost as equally independent of the Persians as of the Turks, which latter he greatly dislikes, notwithstanding the offers made in writing by the Kaimakam of Sarai to obtain his submission.”<sup>550</sup> The Ottomans authorities, who had all along argued that the occupied territories had historically belonged to the Porte, could not openly make claims to Kotur, as it had been ceded to Iran by article 60 of the Treaty of Berlin.<sup>551</sup> The unique status of the district of Kotur, which gave Simko great latitude to rebuff the Ottoman governor’s persistent overtures for his submission, would eventually help him win Russian support to become one of the most powerful personalities on the northern Ottoman-Iranian frontiers before and after World War I.

Further south, in Mergawar, the situation was even more critical. Here, in Mergawar, following the return of Seyyid Abdulkadir to Nawchia, a fierce rivalry had developed between Abdulkaadir and his nephew Seyyid Taha over ownership of villages in the district. This dispute was directly related to the Young Turk policies in the more important region of East Anatolia where intercommunal politics had gotten more polarized. After the counter coup of July 1909, the situation in the occupied districts had become more prone to developments in East Anatolia. The CUP’s liberal policies were consequential in that they had opened the way for the emergence of the agrarian question. Euphemistically referred to as the agrarian question by the Armenian community leaders and European diplomats, the issue involved the restoration of usurped lands by Hamidiye chiefs to their original Kurdish and Armenian owners. The CUP’s efforts in this direction created a contentious situation, causing further deterioration of intercommunal relations. Between 1908 and 1910, the CUP administration exerted itself to find a peaceful solution

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<sup>550</sup> Diary of the British and Russian Delegates from Khoi to Urmia, June 12 to 22, 1911, *Schofield IV*, 497.

<sup>551</sup> Joint Report by Shipley and Minorsky, *Schofield IV*, 546.

to the agrarian question. However, since much of the land had been appropriated by Hamidiye chiefs through semi-legal measures over several decades, it was by no means an easy task to address the problem. The powerful Hamidiye chiefs, as the primary beneficiaries of the land seizures, could and did resist the CUP efforts in several ways. They engaged in effort-bargains with the state through direct negotiations, intimidation tactics, and flight across the borders at the head of their tribesmen. All of these measures, combined with the Armenian insistence that redress should be given or otherwise outside intervention would be sought again, led the CUP to weigh its options and eventually decide to relax its policies of land restoration by 1910. Fearing that pressing the matter would alienate the more numerous and powerful Kurdish subjects of its vulnerable borderlands, the CUP would gradually return to the Hamidian policy of prioritizing Kurdish interests.<sup>552</sup>

During the first two years of the CUP rule, when the agrarian question was hotly debated and there was a general fear that the majority Kurdish population could be alienated and exploited by Russia, the CUP reached out to prominent Kurdish notables such as Sheikh Abdulkadir of Nawchia. Abdulkadir was allowed to return from his place of exile in the Hijaz and to take part in the new administration as a member of the senate. As a prestigious personality with much influence among Kurds, Abdulkadir was chosen by the CUP to participate in the negotiations over the resolution of the agrarian question.<sup>553</sup> At the same time, he was encouraged to throw his weight on the promotion of the new order among the Kurds of the *nevahi-i şarkiyye*. M. S. Lazarev has noted that Sheikh Abdulkadir served as the main pillar in maintaining the Ottoman occupation of western Azerbaijan. According to Lazarev, Abdulkadir had initially leaned towards the

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<sup>552</sup> Klein, *The Margins of Empire*, 152–55.

<sup>553</sup> Klein, 155.

Russians but, having received lukewarm support, he had turned away from them and become instrumental in propagating the extension of the Young Turk regime in Iran. As an example of this reversal of his attitude in 1909, Lazarev pointed to Abdulkadir's effective influence in turning a number of pro-Iranian Kurdish chiefs away from Iran and Russia to the CUP regime.<sup>554</sup>

Seyyid Abdulkadir's assistance with the CUP administration and management of intercommunal affairs in East Anatolia and promotion of the CUP ideology among Iranian Kurds, however, had another side to it. In 1910, after the Young Turks' regime fell back on the old Hamidian policy of investing in Kurdish support, Seyyid Abdulkadir began to lay claim to his father's landed property, which, in his absence, had fallen into the hands of his ambitious nephew, Seyyid Taha. Buoyed by his favored position with the Porte as the most prominent Kurdish representative, tasked with mediation and promotion of the occupation, Abdulkadir was able to take control of numerous villages in Tergawar, Mergawar, and Baradost.<sup>555</sup> Empowerment of favored chiefs and notables had been the mainstay of Ottoman policy in the occupation zone under the Hamidian rule and had been continued under the CUP rule. However, this was not an ordinary situation where one chief could be replaced with another with negligible repercussions. Seyyid Taha was certainly not a minor tribal chief and he made sure that he would not be treated as such.

Seyyid Taha's activities to restore his patrimony in Mergawar would pick up renewed vigor in 1912 when Russian troops replaced the Ottoman occupation forces. By the end of 1911, Russia had completed the railway to Julfa, unsettling Ottoman authorities, who could not afford further complications in the "new frontier" given their monumental problems on their western frontiers. In November 1911, a crisis erupted

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<sup>554</sup> Lazarev, *Kêşey Kurd*, 1:274.

<sup>555</sup> Joint Report by Shipley and Minorsky, *Schofield IV*, 555.

between Iran and Russia which involved Morgan Shuster, the American financial adviser employed by the Iranian government to reform its department of finance. On November 11, 1911, Shuster published an article in *The Times* in which he railed against Russia's and Britain's meddling in Iranian affairs, prompting a reaction from Russia in the form of a request for his dismissal. Even though Iran complied with Russia's wishes and agreed to pay an indemnity for deployment of tsarist troops in northern Iran, Russia nevertheless occupied Azerbaijan. The intervention effectively ended the Iranian constitutional revolution.<sup>556</sup> With Russia in occupation of northern Iran, and with thousands of troops stationed on the northern Ottoman-Iranian frontiers, a new commission was hastily formed, which would finalize the delimitation of the border in October 1914 just about the time the Ottoman Empire officially entered the First World War.

In the wake of the disastrous defeat of the Ottomans at the hands of the Balkan states in 1912, Russia found the moment opportune to displace the Ottoman occupation forces from Azerbaijan. Having done that with little trouble, the Russian occupation of the province was consolidated by the establishment of consulates in the urban centers of Tabriz, Khoi, Salmas, Urmia, and Savujbulagh. As Russian troops poured in and civil structures were set up, Azerbaijan became a *de facto* Russian province. Unlike the *ad hoc* nature of the Ottoman administration of the *nevahi-i şarkiyye*, the Russian civil administration was characterized by a strong military representation. At times the civilian and military departments' conflict of interests led to contradictory policies. However, as the British acting consul at Tabriz Patrick Cowan noted, in the outlying districts Russian consuls acted "hand in glove with the military authorities, and just as domineering in their actions," adding that "at Khoi and Urumieh, the Russian Consuls are virtually

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<sup>556</sup> Ateş, *The Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands*, 2013, 281–82.

governors.”<sup>557</sup> In some sense, reflecting its Ottoman counterpart, the Russian administration consisted of a maze of overlapping authorities who ran the province through their “Persian tools” such as Shuja’ al-Saltaneh and Mujallal al-Mulk. Reports from Urmia and its environs indicated that “the population there is entirely subject to the Russian domination, and that individuals are liable to summary arrest by the Russians for trivial or even imaginary offences.”<sup>558</sup> By November 1913, British consul Smart sounded the alarm that Azerbaijan was on the verge of becoming independent from Tehran as all the officials liked to the capital, including the Belgian customs officials, had been removed and replaced by Russian protégés.<sup>559</sup>

Russian occupation brought with it more security, something that was well received by the foreign communities represented by the British consul and certain business-oriented sectors of the population. As Smart noted, the “one great blessing which the Russian occupation has secured for this province is order. Under the aegis of the Russian troops the roads have enjoyed a security they have not known for many years.”<sup>560</sup> This may have been true in the eastern districts of Azerbaijan away from the northwestern frontiers as Russian policy seemed to be aimed at bringing Azerbaijan under firm control without much expenditure or use of coercive force.

However, quite a different line of policy was pursued along the frontiers west of Urmia where things seemed to be increasingly taking a turn towards violent conflict involving Kurdish tribes, Ottoman troops, and the Russian military. Smart’s comment is indicative of the challenge faced by the Russians in establishing security in the region: “It is on the Turco-Azerbaijan frontier that the most interesting and the most difficult part of

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<sup>557</sup> Cowan to Townley, Tabriz, November 25, 1912 (FO 248/1058), 7.

<sup>558</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>559</sup> Smart to Townley, Tabriz, November 18, 1913 (FO 248/1079).

<sup>560</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

Russia's military action is being played out. Five or six thousand men along a line running through tribal country from Khoi to Soujbulak are obviously inadequate without the backing of native forces."<sup>561</sup> Thus, much like their Ottoman counterparts, Russian authorities also sought to enlist Kurdish support to guard this extensive rugged frontier stretch. In return for professions of loyalty, friendly chiefs received Russian recognition and backing against their rivals. Even so, conflicts could hardly be contained as Russia turned the region into a springboard for Kurdish operations against Ottoman troops and allies across the frontier in East Anatolia. As part of this policy, the Russians began supporting certain Kurdish figures in their effort to destabilize Ottoman rule in East Anatolia. The Ottomans, in turn, were "legitimately alarmed by Russian encroachments on the territory which Turkey recently evacuated on the understanding that it would not be occupied by the troops of a third power."<sup>562</sup>

The British consul at Tabriz maintained that Russian involvement seemed to be inevitable in the frontier districts recently evacuated by the Ottomans, especially since Russian domination had destroyed Iranian authority, thus leaving the Christians of Tergawar and Mergawar to the mercy of the Kurds. Sooner or later, the consul added, "local circumstances will force the Russians into a more or less permanent occupation of the Persian districts immediately on the present Turco-Azerbaijan frontier."<sup>563</sup> In support of his argument, Smart mentioned that Russian military action in western Azerbaijan was greatly influenced by the Russian ecclesiastical authorities. The Orthodox mission in Urmia conducted a "vigorous propaganda, supported by methods scarcely distinguishable from persecution, with the object of bringing into the Orthodox fold all the local

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<sup>561</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>562</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>563</sup> Ibid., 18.



Christian sects.”<sup>564</sup> Orthodox Christians received strong support from the Russian Orthodox mission under Sergius, including support in their civil claims, and protection against the Kurds to those who converted to Orthodoxy. This view was echoed by the American missionaries as well. In February 1914, Shedd expressed his concern about having the adherents of the Presbyterian mission take their oaths with the Russian archimandrite. He complained that Sergius “has heretofore shown a spirit of bitter antagonism towards the Syrian Evangelical communion of which many of our naturalized citizens are members, as well as opposition to non-orthodox Christian bodies, including the French Catholic and our Presbyterian Missions.”<sup>565</sup>

#### **RUSSO-OTTOMAN RIVALRY OVER EAST ANATOLIA’S KURDISH AND ARMENIAN COMMUNITIES:**

However, in 1913, the situation on the Ottoman-Iranian frontiers was much more serious than the rosy picture portrayed by the British consul Smart of Russia’s successful establishment of security in Azerbaijan. The massive deployment of Russian forces to Azerbaijan and the posting of consuls in various frontier towns reflected Russia’s deep anxieties over the monumental developments that were unfolding across the border in East Anatolia in the wake of the Balkan wars. This was particularly so as “Ottoman and Russian imperial rivalry and insecurities interacted in a particularly complex form in

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<sup>564</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>565</sup> Paddock to Assistant Secretary of State, Tabriz, February 7, 1914 (RG 84). In his 1914 Report on Civil and Political Conditions, William A. Shedd described the political conditions in Urmia as very unsatisfactory under Sergius, the Russian Archimandrite. He wrote: “When my last year’s report was written we had a weak governor and the Russian Consul was inefficient. The dominating and domineering figure in local affairs was the head of the Russian Mission, whose will was law. Any law suit was taken up by him, in case either the complainant was a member of the Orthodox Church, would promise to become such, or would pay for church purposes a specified sum of money. The justice of the case was not a condition. The method was to demand of the Persian authorities such and such a decision often without the forms of investigation or trial. The effect of such a state of things may well be imagined. Nothing, I believe, has served to bring such disgrace to the name of Christianity during all the years that there have been foreign missionaries in Urumia. Mussulmans have said to me the Archimandrite was worse than the most unscrupulous mujtahid. Shedd to ?, Urumia, September 6, 1914 (RG 84).

Eastern Anatolia, which constituted a double borderland where the two empires blurred into each other in a zone distinct from the centers of both.”<sup>566</sup> This population mix gave rise to a complex situation where imperial support for one group against another had to be countered and balanced by support for the same group that was being undermined. Both Russia and the Ottoman Empire had Kurdish and Armenian populations on both side of their borders and these populations pursued aspirations that had been originally backed by the imperial centers but now had to be undone as these national ambitions had now come to jeopardize central sovereignty and the very idea of empire as a multi-ethnic realm.

In order to stave off great power intervention in the region, especially that of Russia, the Unionists had invested immense effort and energy in bringing the region under tight control since they had taken the reins of the state in 1908. As part of this process, they had taken pain to resolve the Armenian Question and the more contentious problem associated with it: the agrarian question. By 1910, the Unionists’ plan to restore the usurped lands in order to reconcile the communities under a benevolent but strong central power had gone awry but not before large sections of the Kurdish population were estranged. The Unionists’ efforts to disband the Hamidiye, to settle the nomadic *ashirets*, to extract more revenue and resources from the region, and to prosecute criminals regardless of religious distinctions had ruffled feathers. The crux of the problem lay in the impossibility of a comprehensive solution. The solution to the Kurdish-Armenian conflict seemed to be mutually exclusive in the context of the interstate competition as “the great powers held the Ottoman government responsible for resolving that conflict, yet Istanbul could barely contain it. External pressure pushed it [the Porte] to support the

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<sup>566</sup> Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, 46.

Armenians, but domestic political calculation dictated that it appease the Kurds.”<sup>567</sup> The Unionists eventually had to adopt the latter course over time as they realized that the Armenian leadership’s ties (specifically the Tashnaikits’) to the outside world and the Armenian communities in the Russian Caucasus made it practically an international interest group with dangerous potentials. The CUP also recognized that the advantages of investing in trans-border religious identity of the Kurds outweighed those laying in the appeasement of Armenians if the primary objective was to fend off Russia.

The outbreak of the Balkan wars in October 1912 was not just important in that it had revealed the weakness of the Ottoman state because that was an already widespread impression. Rather what alarmed Russia was that the imminent collapse of the Ottoman state could lead to the emergence of a “failed state” in East Anatolia along its own vulnerable frontiers. This represented an acute challenge as Russia had its own Armenian problem and the chaotic situation of an Ottoman collapse could be exploited by organized Armenian groups to undermine Russia’s sovereignty in the Caucasus. Worse yet, Russia was concerned that another great power might exploit the event of an Ottoman collapse to its benefit and effectively block Russia’s ambition to gain access to the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf. To remedy the situation, Russia resurrected the Armenian Question and its demand to oversee the reform and the administration of the six provinces even as it also began to cultivate ties with Kurdish rebel chiefs, thereby counterproductively undermining the very stability it desired along its Caucasian borders.<sup>568</sup>

Russia’s proposals to be the main party to oversee the reform process, coupled with its courtship of Kurdish loyalty, panicked the Porte as it bore an uncanny

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<sup>567</sup> Reynolds, 47.

<sup>568</sup> Reynolds, 72.

resemblance to the proceedings before the losses of Bosnia and Macedonia. Great powers were blaming Istanbul for not being able to preserve order in the frontier provinces while they actively incited rebels and malcontents to destabilize that order. Michael Reynolds has aptly described the perplexities encountered by the Porte in the face of Russia's attempts to forestall the possibilities arising from an Ottoman collapse in East Anatolia:

Now Russia was eroding Ottoman sovereignty in Eastern Anatolia from within and simultaneously attacking that sovereignty from without by calling attention to Istanbul's inability to govern the region. The Ottomans were not alone in perceiving a clever link between Russian complaints about the lack of order and threats of "humanitarian" intervention, and their support for Kurdish rebels who were subverting that order. European and American observers noted it as well. Nor were they alone in the belief that the reform project was a last preparatory step before formal Russian annexation of the region and the end of the empire.<sup>569</sup>

The Porte finally succumbed to the Russian demands for reforms in 1913 and the crisis passed over, giving way to smoother diplomatic relations. However, tensions remained as high as ever in the region itself as the prospect of an Ottoman collapse persisted and Russia continued to subvert Ottoman rule in East Anatolia. Russia deemed it necessary to build influence among the Kurds as it wanted to strengthen its chances of controlling the final partition of the Ottoman empire in case of its collapse.<sup>570</sup> It is against this context that Russia's actions and dealings with the Kurds in western Azerbaijan need to be examined.

#### **RUSSIA AND THE KURDS IN IRANIAN AZERBAIJAN:**

One way for Russia to make inroads into East Anatolia was through cultivating ties with rebel Kurdish chiefs. In this respect, three figures particularly stand out: Simko Agha Shikak at Kotur, Seyyid Taha in Mergawar, and Abdürrezzak Bedirhan in

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<sup>569</sup> Reynolds, 75.

<sup>570</sup> Reynolds, 77.

Azerbaijan and the Caucasus. Abdürrezzak Bedirhan's case has formed the subject of a thorough investigation by Reynolds in an article, in which he suggested that imperial frontier security imperatives in a world dominated by interstate dynamics of competition demanded of Russian authorities, especially those based in the Caucasus, to consider winning the support of Kurdish tribes.<sup>571</sup> Simko and Taha's cases have, however, been less studied. Thus, the following section examines the stories of these three individuals as part of an imperial struggle for control of the Russo-Ottoman-Iranian borderlands and the transformation of identities of local actors and communities.

Abdürrezzak Bedirhan's story helps to bring together the seemingly disparate stories of Simko and Seyyid Taha. Born into the most prominent family of Kurdistan, Abdürrezzak presents the most intriguing personality on the Ottoman-Iranian borderlands. As a result of the exile of his father, Bedirhan Pasha in 1847, Abdürrezzak was born and raised in the cosmopolitan milieu of Istanbul and was exposed to wide-ranging influences, including his family members' political and literary activities such as promoting Kurdish as a language in the form of publications and rubbing shoulders with the Young Turks and their liberal ideas. The Bedirhan family's relations with Sultan Abdülhamid II were initially very close as members of the family were able to ascend the Ottoman political hierarchy. However, with the creation of the Hamidiye regiments, these relations were somewhat strained as the Bedirhans considered the Hamidian policies of favoring the Hamidiye chiefs (which directly affected the Bedirhans' patrimonial property in Jazirah) an impediment to progress and civilization among the Kurds. For instance, the publication of the first Kurdish newspaper in Cairo in 1899 by Berdihan

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<sup>571</sup> Michael A. Reynolds, "Abdürrezzak Bedirhan: Ottoman Kurd and Russophile in the Twilight of Empire," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12, no. 2 (April 28, 2011): 411–50.

family members irked Abdülhamid for its scathing attacks on the sultan's conservative policies and his deficient attention to promotion of education in East Anatolia.<sup>572</sup>

Hailing from such a background, Abdürrezzak, who had acquired fluency in French, wished to go to Paris, but a suspicious Abdülhamid II blocked his way. In search of an alternative, Abdürrezzak settled on pursuing a career with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Through this channel, he found his way to the Ottoman Embassy in St. Petersburg as the third secretary. There, he learned Russian, and in recognition of his Russophile attitude, he was awarded with the Order of St. Stanislav of the second degree. Reynold suggests that Abdürrezzak's sojourn in Russia left a profound impression on him for he would soon emerge as "an advocate not merely of Kurdish secession from the Ottoman Empire but of union with Russia and the spread of Russian culture, language, and literature among the Kurds."<sup>573</sup>

In 1896 on the way to his new post to the Ottoman Embassy at Tehran, Abdürrezzak was recalled by Abdülhamid II. Uncertain about his treatment back in the Ottoman capital, Abdürrezzak went to Tiflis where he asked for Russian help to stage a revolt against the sultan. He was turned down this time, and, on his father's advice, returned to Istanbul and was able to ascend the Ottoman bureaucracy to the level of Abdülhamid II's master of ceremonies and was awarded with the Ottoman Order of first decree. However, in 1906, he was implicated in the murder of Ridvan Pasha, the prefect of Istanbul, and a plot to overthrow the sultan, and was consequently sent to exile in Tripoli along with large numbers of his family. There he languished in prison until the Young Turks seized power. However, unlike other family members, his release and

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<sup>572</sup> Kamāl Muḥzar Aḥmad, *Kurdistan during the First World War*, trans. 'Alī Māhir Ibrāhīm (London: Saqi Books, 1994), 55–56.

<sup>573</sup> Michael A. Reynolds, "Abdurrezzak Bedirhan: Ottoman Kurd and Russophile in the Twilight of Empire," *Kritika* 12, no. 2 (March 22, 2011): 422.

return to Istanbul was delayed until 1910.<sup>574</sup> Even though the CUP had deposed the sultan, who had been responsible for his imprisonment, Abdürrezzak was not very sympathetic to the Young Turks as he of the opinion that they were not interested in improvement of the situation of the “Kurdish people.” Soon, he informed his associates in Istanbul that he was leaving for Kurdistan “to civilise his people.”<sup>575</sup>

Thus, Abdürrezzak went to Kurdistan and started touring the region, promoting loudly the advantages of Russian culture, civilization, and power under which he sought to establish a Kurdish *beylik*, or emirate. Meanwhile, he sent several petitions to Russian authorities, which were initially turned down, but soon received approval from the Minister of Interior and his requests for Russian citizenship and residence in Erivan were granted. Sayyid Taha and Simko also courted Russian protection but Russian authorities preferred Abdürrezzak for several reasons: First, he was the descendant of a prestigious dynast. Secondly, he was well versed in Russian culture and politics and had many acquaintances among Russian officials. Thirdly, his insistence that the Kurds should be assimilated into Russian culture worked in his favor among Russian official circles. According to Reynolds, Abdürrezzak’s motives in courting Russian support for the Kurds were not only informed by his nationalist aspirations. The notion that the powerful Russian state could dispel the Ottomans, who had usurped his ancestral patrimony, also played a role in his orientation towards Russia.<sup>576</sup>

The Russians were interested in the Kurds for several reasons. First, they had to deal with Kurds in the South Caucasus and in Iran after they had occupied Azerbaijan following the withdrawal of the Ottoman forces from the region in 1912. Secondly,

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<sup>574</sup> Ebdurriзақ Bedirxan, *Autobiografiya Ebdurriзақ Bedirxan*, ed. Džhalile Džhalil (Berlin: Kovara Havîbûn, 1999), 19–20.

<sup>575</sup> Reynolds, “Abdurrezzak Bedirhan,” March 22, 2011, 422–26.

<sup>576</sup> Reynolds, 427.

Ottoman East Anatolia had assumed a more strategic significance in light of increased Ottoman weakness, which led Russian officials to believe that the region could fall to another great power such as Britain or Germany. The presence of numerous European and American missionaries and consuls only confirmed their beliefs. Thirdly, Russia could exploit the Kurds as a counterweight to the Armenians whose nationalist aspirations posed a danger to Russian control of the Caucasus and East Anatolia.<sup>577</sup> Fear of Armenian revolutionaries had grown following Russia's disastrous policy to confiscate Armenian church properties in 1903, creating increased popular support for the revolutionaries who then shifted their efforts against Russian imperialist policies.<sup>578</sup> Following the Young Turk revolution in 1908, the Dashnakists even managed to enlist CUP support in launching attacks against Russian interests in the Caucasus. Thus, tsarist policy makers had an Armenian dilemma of their own to deal with, and for meeting their objectives in this respect, the Kurds could be useful.<sup>579</sup>

Russian administrators had dealt with Kurdish tribes since the early years of conquering the Caucasus. By the turn of the twentieth century, however, tsarist policy makers had come to see the Kurds as a nation with the major defect of a predominantly tribal disunity that needed to be overcome for better control. After all, it was easier to deal with national figures in control of large segments of populations than a host of tribes with conflicting interests. In 1912, it was crucial for Russia to pacify the Kurdish tribes of Iran in order to establish frontier security within Azerbaijan and also to increase its

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<sup>577</sup> Reynolds, "Abdurrezzak Bedirhan," 428.

<sup>578</sup> Walker, *Armenia*, 70–75. From 1896 until 1905, the governor of the Russian Caucasus was Prince Grigory Golitsyn whose policies eventually led to intercommunal strife among Armenians and Azeris and massacres between the two groups, out of which violence emerged the Dashnakists as the leading Armenian organization. It was around this same time, with the Iranian constitutional revolution unfolding that the Armenians decided to repair the damage by throwing their weight in favor of the Iranian revolution. The policy was very successful for a while but the imperial rivalry over the borderlands complicated the policy later, leading eventually to outbreak of massacres perpetrated by all sides.

<sup>579</sup> Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, 98–102.



influence in East Anatolia. However, there was no consensus among Russian officials in their approaches to the Kurds. Basile Nikitine, the Russian vice-consul at Urmia in 1916, echoed this view, stating that there were as many Kurdish policies in circulation as there were Russian consuls.<sup>580</sup> Michael Reynolds challenges this position, arguing that there was a logic in Russia's dealings with the Kurds, and in 1910, it was this overarching concern with establishing security along the Iranian frontiers with the Ottoman Empire that underlay Russia's interaction with Kurds there.<sup>581</sup>

Once the Russians occupied Tabriz in 1909 and came in direct contact with Ottoman troops in western Azerbaijan, efforts to counter Ottoman anti-Russian propaganda among the Kurds began in earnest. The first steps taken by the Russian authorities involved measures to draw the Kurdish tribes of the Iranian frontiers towards themselves. With that object in mind, they supported Simko in his resistance against Ottoman overtures to surrender Kotur. This imperial backing dovetailed with Simko's own vision of preserving his autonomy and was thus enthusiastically welcomed. Through Russian influence on the Iranian administration of Azerbaijan, Simko was awarded with the title of Salar al-*'Ashayir* (commander of all *ashirets*). To strengthen such Kurdish-Russian links, the Russians, a year later, in the summer of 1912 invited Simko along with several other chiefs and notables to the Caucasus, where they were decorated by the Viceroy of the Caucasus.<sup>582</sup>

With such imperial backing, Simko started to make forays across the border with the dual purpose of acquiring loot and impressing Russia's power and prestige on the Ottoman Kurds to win them over.<sup>583</sup> Simko's influence increased tremendously to the

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<sup>580</sup> Basil Nikitin, *Īrānī kih man shinākhtah-am*, trans. 'Alī Muḥammad Farahvashī (Tihiran, 1951), 229–32.

<sup>581</sup> Reynolds, "Abdurrezzak Bedirhan," March 22, 2011, 430.

<sup>582</sup> Monahan to Lowther, Erzeroum, April 30, 1913, no. 31, *Record of the Kurds*, 551.

<sup>583</sup> Monahan to Lowther, Erzeroum, April 30, 1913, no. 31, *Records of the Kurds*, Vol. 4, 551.

point that he was even reported to be making intrigues across the border to influence the appointment of the *valis* of Van. Ottoman authorities bitterly complained that Russian diplomacy blocked them from taking effective measures against “frontier brigands” like Simko.<sup>584</sup> Such complaints were not specific to Simko as from 1912 onwards, the northern stretch of the Ottoman-Iranian borders turned into a safe haven for Kurdish chiefs and notables hostile to Ottoman authorities. A certain Mir Mihe and Said Bey figured among the prominent rebels seeking to destabilize Ottoman rule in cooperation with Simko and Abdürrezzak. Said Bey, who had acquired large tracts of land and villages in the Hamidian era, had been compelled to give up his land-holdings by Bekir Sami Bey under the Unionist regime. Said Bey had refused to restore the usurped lands to their original Armenian owners, and had instead taken up arms against the new regime. The British consul at Van confirmed the view that Said Bey could not “be reckoned as an ordinary brigand. He is in rebellion against the government and confines himself to attacks against representatives of the same.”<sup>585</sup>

Although such conflicts between Kurds and the Ottoman troops were widespread but they did not pose a serious threat to Ottoman rule and were dealt with easily by the Ottoman troops. They were nevertheless important as they gave out a sense of prevalent insecurity in East Anatolia, which was exploited by Russia to strengthen its position in the diplomatic arena with respect to the Armenian reform project. In order to increase the attachment of the Kurds to the tsarist administration in Azerbaijan and to boost the effectiveness of Kurdish opposition to Ottoman rule, the Russians supported Abdürrezzak in his propaganda activities among the frontier Kurds. In 1911, Abdürrezzak made a tour of the frontier region where he met with numerous Kurdish chiefs, including Simko Agha

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<sup>584</sup> Molyneux-Seel to Lowther, Van, October 31, 1911, no. 22, *Records of the Kurds*, Vol. 4, 525.

<sup>585</sup> *Ibid.*, 525-26

Shikak and Kurdo Beg of Begzadeh. His activities were closely watched by the Ottoman authorities who were suspicious of Russian intrigues among Kurds. Consequently, as soon as Abdürrezzak arrived in Urmia, the Ottoman vice-consul, Sadullah Bey issued orders for his arrest. Abdürrezzak was, however, able to extricate himself in time. He was informed of Sadullah Bey's plans to arrest him by Agha Petros, who was now himself courting Russian support. The Russian Consul at Urmia, Golubinov, eventually escorted Abdürrezzak out of Urmia, amidst Tehran's and Istanbul's fierce protestations against his protection by Russian authorities.<sup>586</sup>

Following this incident, Abdürrezzak recognized the urgent need for creating a united Kurdish front against the Ottomans. Thus, he started working out a plan to bring the Kurdish tribal leaders together. In May 1912, he managed to set up an organization in coordination with Sheikh Abdussalam Barzani and Kheyreddin Berazi, and called it "Irshad" (correct guidance). Making the liberation of Kurdistan from Ottoman rule its primary objective, this organization soon opened up branches in Van, Diyarbakir, and Urfa.<sup>587</sup> Abdussalam was soon reported to be engaging Ottoman troops in sporadic skirmishes. What united these leaders in their courtship of Russian support was their common dissatisfaction with the CUP regime's policies that had either led to their material dispossession or whose policies they deemed to be in opposition to the Islamic sharia law. As a result, they desired to establish a Muslim Kurdish principality under tsarist rule on the model of the Russian protectorates of Khiva and Bukhara where Muslims enjoyed internal autonomy. Berazi, who was also in close contact with the Russians, knowing that a sovereign independent Kurdistan was not possible, appealed to

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<sup>586</sup> Bedirxan, *Autobiografiya Ebdurrizaq Bedirxan*, 23–24. See also, Molyneux-Seel to Lowther, Van, June 26, 1911, no. 15, *Records of the Kurds*, Vol. 4, 285.

<sup>587</sup> Reynolds, "Abdürrezzak Bedirhan," 431–32.

Russian officials to attach Kurdistan to their empire as an autonomous principality like the German principalities in Germany.<sup>588</sup>

During the Balkan wars of October 1912, when the Ottomans were almost entirely pushed out of their European possessions by the combined assaults of Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Montenegro forces, St. Petersburg raised the question of Armenian reforms again as it simultaneously began to make more proactive efforts to draw away the Kurds from Istanbul by increasing Russian prestige among them. The result of such efforts was the establishment of another Kurdish society, called Jihandani (upbringing). As part of these efforts, which were meant to propagate Russian culture and civilization among the inchoate Kurdish 'nation', as the Russians saw it, Simko and Abdürrezzak were assisted in their joint efforts to launch this cultural enterprise. "Whereas Irshad's objective had been political and military coordination, this new society's goal was to foster a Kurdish collective identity through the establishment of a press, the publishing of a weekly newspaper, and the opening of schools. Russia willingly lent its cover and support to the society."<sup>589</sup> The two chiefs were able to establish a school in Khoi in 1913. The greatest challenge threatening the school from the outset came from the Iranian authorities and populace, who viewed the Kurds as no better than the Russians. Religious Iranian and Ottoman leaders spread rumors that the real purpose behind establishing the school was to convert Kurds to Christianity. Despite the opposition, however, the school was opened with twenty nine students in attendance. Notably, at the inauguration ceremony, attended by high-ranking Russian officials, a Kurdish *mullah* prayed for the tsar's long life and prolonged rule.<sup>590</sup>

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<sup>588</sup> Reynolds, 432.

<sup>589</sup> Reynolds, 434.

<sup>590</sup> Reynolds, 434–36.

Russian ventures to subvert Ottoman rule in East Anatolia and along the Ottoman-Iranian frontiers were not confined to Simko and Abdürrezzak. Further south of Kotur, in Mergawar, there was an even more critical situation, which involved Seyyid Taha of Nawchia. Seyyid Taha had initially lent his wholehearted support to the Ottoman occupation of the disputed frontier districts in Iran until the return of his uncle, Seyyid Abdulkadir to Nawchia in 1910. Upon his return from exile in Mecca, Abdulkadir became the CUP liaison in their effort-bargain to resolve the agrarian question between Kurds and Armenians. His prominent position in the more important political arena of East Anatolia endowed him with immense power and prestige in the CUP circles and among the Kurdish tribes. His influence was also crucial in promoting the new Ottoman order in the occupied districts. In return for his assistance to the new regime, Abdulkadir was allowed to take possession of his grandfather's property in Mergawar, thus putting him directly at odds with Seyyid Taha, who had already claimed ownership of the property in question. As an ambition personality, Seyyid Taha not only did not defer to the authority of his uncle, but, quite to the contrary, he fiercely disputed Abdulkadir's rights of ownership.<sup>591</sup> The Ottoman authorities tried to reconcile the feuding sheikhs by bringing them to the negotiating table in Istanbul. The Anglican missionary William A. Wigram claimed that both sheikhs were arrested and taken to Istanbul, where a compromise was brokered, according to which "Abd -l-Kadr agreed to accept a liberal allowance from the family funds; and to live in Stamboul, the city he knew, rather than set up as a savage chief in Kurdistan."<sup>592</sup>

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<sup>591</sup> Diary No. 6, Soujboulak through Old Lahidjan, Ushnu, Dehtebil, Mergever, Desht, Tergever, and Inchkesu to Urmi, August 18–30, 1911, *Schofield IV*, 527.

<sup>592</sup> Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, 46.

However, the Porte's efforts at conflict resolution do not seem to have been so effective. In February 1912, embittered at his uncle's usurpation of his property, Seyyid Taha returned to Khoi to seek Russian help. Upon his arrival in Khoi, Taha was immediately taken into custody by Ottoman troops and was being transferred to Bashkale, when Ismail Agha Simko came to his aid and secured his release. Keenly aware of the danger posed to him from Ottoman authorities across the border, Seyyid Taha placed himself under Russian protection and hoisted the Russian flag at his Urmia residence.<sup>593</sup> Between 1912 and 1914, Taha made numerous attempts to undermine Ottoman authority in the frontier region with the aim of wresting back control of his property. Sometime in 1912, he detained Mohammad Sharif Efendi, a merchant from Mosul, who had served as his father's agent in Urmia, and extorted a large sum of money from him on the charges that he was indebted to his father. His arrest and extortion of an Ottoman subject led to a series of protestations by the Ottoman ambassador at Tehran with no avail as the Iranian government had little means of confronting Seyyid Taha, who enjoyed Russian protection.<sup>594</sup>

Later in the same year, tension between the two rival sheikhs (Abdulkadir was represented by his son as he had left for Istanbul) erupted into a bloody confrontation, in which some thirty of Seyyid Taha's subjects in the village of Katuna were killed and captured and dragged away as prisoners. Seyyid Taha attempted retaliation through obtaining help from the Russian vice consul at Urmia. Upon hearing evasive responses, he presented his case to the Russian consul at Khoi. However, according to the Mujallal al-Mulk, the Iranian *karguzar* at Urmia, his representations and "exposure of Seyyid

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<sup>593</sup> Mujallal al-Mulk Karguzar to Karguzari Azerbaijan, Urmia, No.2, 1 Muharram 1331 / December 11, 1912.

<sup>594</sup> Mujallal al-Mulk to Karguzari Azerbaijan, Urmia, No.2, 1 Muharram 1331 / December 11, 1912.

Taha's true material intentions for his alliance with Russia" frustrated Taha's plans.<sup>595</sup> This was a self-congratulatory note, of course. It was not the intervention of the Iranian *karguzar* that undercut Taha's plans. Taha failed to secure Russian support because Russian policy was directed at establishing security inside Iranian frontiers while destabilizing Ottoman rule in East Anatolia by indirect means. Russian authorities favored Taha as a counterweight to his uncle's influence among the Kurds and to that end they strove to foster the Kurdish tribes' loyalty to his person. Thus, Russian authorities' overt military support to Taha, in his feud with his uncle, militated against their overarching goal of winning over Kurds. This is why probably his request for intervention was turned down this time.

The contrast between this occasion and another incident in July 1913 better reveals the logic of Russian policy in supporting the Iranian frontier Kurds. Russian occupation of the same frontier districts that had been evacuated by the Ottomans led to a partial reversal in land tenure patterns. Some of the usurped lands were allowed to be reclaimed by their original owners. For instance, a certain Abdullah Bey of the Begzadeh tribes, who had planted himself in the Karapapakh district of Dol in Solduz by displacing the Shi'i khans, was forced by the khans to give up the villages he had acquired and to return to his original residence in Mergawar. His return to Mergawar was, however, consequential as his presence there put him at odds with Seyyid Taha, who did not want any rivals on his turf. Before long, the two chiefs had fallen out, upon which Russian mediation became necessary to keep peace inside the Russian occupied frontier zone. To remedy the situation, the Russian vice-consul in Urmia, Golubinov, summoned Abdullah Bey to Urmia for negotiations but the Begzadeh chief refused to appear in person,

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<sup>595</sup> Ibid.

perhaps because he expected the adjudication not to be in his favor. Thus, the consul, in the company of Taha and his consular guards, scaled the mountains to Mergawar to resolve the question. An alarmed Abdullah Bey ambushed the entourage and killed several Russian officers and Cossacks, a brother of Karim Khan Herki, and another Begzadeh chief.<sup>596</sup> Having done enough to repair his sour relations with the Ottomans by openly defying the enemies of the Ottoman Empire, Abdullah Bey felt confident to seek refuge across the frontier. He fled, leaving Taha as the undisputed magnate in Mergawar. Taha was soon appointed as the director of the customs office in Mergawar on behalf of the Iranian government of Azerbaijan and assigned a salary by the Russians.<sup>597</sup>

#### **THE KURDISH AUTONOMIST MOVEMENT AND THE ARMENIAN REFORM PROJECT:**

Reports by Captain Molyneux-Seel, the British vice-consul at Van, indicate that the frontier complications were much graver than the impression given out by the incidental reports of the British consul at Tabriz. During the Balkan wars in April 1913, Molyneux-Seel alerted the British ambassador at Istanbul to the tense situation in Van. Rumors floated around that the Russians were about to intervene on behalf of the Armenians and Nestorians; that Armenians had availed themselves of machine guns; and that the Nestorians had received 3000 rifles and guns from the Russians. The specter of an impending Russian intervention on behalf of East Anatolia's Christians, well captured

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<sup>596</sup> Mujallal al-Mulk? to Karguzar-i Azerbaijan, Urmia, No. 418, 5 Shaban 1331/ 10 July 1913. This report is corroborated by Consul Smart's July 13, 1913 report in which he describes the incident as follows: There has been an affray between Russian troops and Kurds in Margawar. My information tends to show that Russian troops espoused quarrel of one of the Kurdish chiefs against another and that artillery was used but my Russian colleague to whom I suggested danger of sending Russian troops into territory recently evacuated by Turks assured me that Russian vice-consul at Urumia had merely been traveling in Mergawar with a small escort of Cossacks and several horsemen of one of the Kurdish chiefs in question [Seyyid Taha], that the other chief [Abdullah Bey] attacked Consular party and that the two companies of Russian troops from Urumia had to be sent as reinforcements. Several Russians were killed including, I am informed, two officers but my Russian colleague says he has not received detailed information tho' he assures me expedition has returned to Urumia.

<sup>597</sup> Smith to Mallet, Van, March 13, 1914, no. 5, *Records of the Kurds*, Vol. 4, 588.



in the rumor that a Russian airplane had been spotted over Van, was creating an atmosphere of panic among Kurds. The swift and total Ottoman defeat in the Balkan wars, which continued to threaten the very existence of the Ottoman Empire itself, coupled with Russia's militant stance on the projected Armenian reforms, terrified the Kurds even as they heartened the Armenians of Van to entertain "hopes of not merely of reforms but of being definitely released from Turkish rule."<sup>598</sup> Fervent displays of sympathy with the Armenians in the European press, combined with open displays of support for them by the Russian agents in Van, also prompted the Armenians "to throw off any pretense of loyalty and openly welcome the prospect of a Russian occupation of the Armenian vilayets."<sup>599</sup> Other reports suggested that the Dashnakists had even begun to distribute arms among Armenian villagers of Van as they made public declarations that they would only wait until the end of the Balkan hostilities to gauge the progress on the projected reforms. Ottoman failure to meet their demands, they warned, would compel them to take matters into their own hands.<sup>600</sup>

In such an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty about the future, the Kurds also started to mobilize by holding frequent meetings and collecting arms. The Kurdish tribes of Van feared that the implementation of the projected Armenian reforms would translate into the annihilation of "their national existence." At the head of what came to be known as the Kurdish autonomist movement stood members of the famed Bedirhan family such as Hussein Pasha Bedirhanizade in Jazira. Abddürrezzak, as noted above, had meanwhile been engaging in propagating the idea of a Kurdish *beylik* with Russian support. His relative, Hussein Pasha, however, had chosen Jazira as the center of his activities.

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<sup>598</sup> Molyneux-Seel to Lowther, Van, no. 9, April 4, 1913, *Records of the Kurds*, Vol. 4, 445-46.

<sup>599</sup> *Ibid.*, 545-46.

<sup>600</sup> *Ibid.* 546.

Throughout 1912 and 1913, Hussein Pasha also systematically toured the frontier region in an effort to promote the idea of Kurdish self-rule. His efforts were not merely confined to Kurdish tribes. He also visited Mar Shimuna and the Yezidis of Sinjar in Mosul, and purportedly secured promises of support from them. In addition to these groups, Armenian leaders were approached with similar propositions and invited to participate in a joint enterprise against the CUP regime. However, since the Armenian leadership, at this time, anxiously awaited the outcome of the projected reforms, it extended no commitments to the Kurdish leaders about joining efforts.<sup>601</sup> The impact of the propaganda for Kurdish autonomy, nevertheless, reached other regions of the Ottoman-Iranian frontiers as far south as Sulaymaniyye. Abdürrezzak and Seyyid Taha took even a step further by declaring the independence of “the districts of Jelu [Nestorian country] and Neri [Gawar] and the country that lies between those places and a line drawn from Chal over the Shirindagh towards Shnu [in Iran].”<sup>602</sup>

Such activities, especially those pursued by Hussein Pasha, occurred at the height of the Balkan wars as the great powers, led by Russia, passionately debated the idea of the Armenian reform project, which amounted to autonomy for Armenians under foreign supervision. The reform project, resurrected by Russia to secure its influence in the event of an Ottoman collapse, had followed other reforms in the legal and the administrative structure of the provinces under the Unionist regime, allowing Christians to be conscripted into the army and to carry arms. Under the new regime, taxes, especially the sheep tax, had also increased dramatically. These modifications seemed to have meant only to improve the lives of the Christian inhabitants of East Anatolia, especially as the Kurdish chiefs now, besides having to restore usurped lands, were compelled to pay

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<sup>601</sup> Monahan to Lowther, Erzeroum, April 30, 1913, no. 31, *Records of the Kurds*, Vol. 4, 551.

<sup>602</sup> Hony to Lowther, Mosul, April 3, 1913, no. 8, *Records of the Kurds*, Vol. 4, 548.

higher taxes. Such reforms were further complemented by the Unionists' concerted efforts to prevent the outbreak of an intercommunal conflict between Kurds and Christians, which meant suppression of brigandage and severe punishment of rebels, in which Armenians also took part. For instance, in June 1913, when a number of Armenian villages in Archag and Karchigan came under Kurdish attacks from across the frontier, not only were the Armenian inhabitants protected by regular Ottoman troops, their village defenses were also reinforced by fresh supplies of arms.<sup>603</sup> The CUP had been forced to adopt sweeping measures to demonstrate its sincerity and determination in improving the conditions of the Armenians in order to deter an impending Russian intervention, creating a major Kurdish backlash in the process. However, the CUP leaders were not just afraid of the Kurds for initiating an intercommunal conflict. As Molyneux-Seel reported, "The dangers that confront the authorities thus come from the Kurds, or from the Tashnakists, or from both."<sup>604</sup>

Such forceful efforts by the CUP to protect Armenians against Kurdish attacks, while the state was negotiating a perceived pro-Armenian deal with the powers, sent an unmistakable message to the Kurds that their "national existence" was in danger. This tense situation provided a window of opportunity to the Kurdish autonomy movement. By May 1913, all doubts concerning the existence of such a movement had disappeared from the minds of the incredulous British consuls in East Anatolia. Molyneux-Seel asserted that the "object of the movement – for there is no longer any doubt that such exists – appears to extend to the establishing of a Kurdish autonomy by revolutionary means, but in any case it may be considered as a demonstration (and may exceed those

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<sup>603</sup> Molyneux-Seel to Lowther, Van, June 24, 1913, no. 16, *Records of the Kurds*, Vol. 4, 561-62.

<sup>604</sup> *Ibid.*, 546.

limits) against the alleged privileges to be granted to the Armenians.”<sup>605</sup> Led by Abdürrezzak Bedirhan, in collaboration with Simko, Seyyid Taha, and Said Bey, the movement, he said, was centered at the Ottoman-Iranian frontiers, and undoubtedly supported by Russia. The autonomy-seeking leaders had issued warnings that were the Kurds of the *vilayets* of Van and Bitlis not to follow their orders to join the revolt, they would launch attacks against non-compliant Kurds from four fronts through the border. Thus, regardless of Russia’s persistent dismissal of rumors of support for the Kurds, it was clear to Kurds in East Anatolia, Ottoman authorities, and British officials alike that Russia was undoubtedly encouraging the Kurdish movement for autonomy. The question on the minds of the British officials was why Russia, which was simultaneously pursuing the Armenian reform project in diplomatic circles, would lend support to a Kurdish movement.

Molyneux-Seel put forth an answer. It was not so much that the interests of the Russian Asiatic department were again in conflict with those of the Foreign Ministry, as Lowther and Marling, the British ambassadors at Istanbul thought. It was because Russia had also its own Armenian question to deal with and the realization of the Armenian autonomy project was not in Russia’s best interests. “An autonomous or semi-autonomous Armenian province dividing Turkey from Russia, besides creating discontent among Russian Armenians would form a very effective barrier against Russian expansion in this direction.”<sup>606</sup> Moreover, as Michael Reynolds has demonstrated, the potential of Armenian autonomy to check its imperialist drive for expansion was not Russia’s primary concern. Russia was also afraid that an Ottoman state collapse could create a chaotic situation at its Caucasian border, which might be exploited by another power. From the

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<sup>605</sup> Molyneux-Seel to Lowther, Van, May 8, 1913, no. 12, *Records of the Kurds*, Vol. 4, 556.

<sup>606</sup> Molyneux to Lowther, Van, June 9, 1913, no. 18, *Records of the Kurds*, Vol. 4, 567.

perspective of Russian diplomats, who viewed politics within the parameters of anarchic international state competition, the prospect of another power dominating the region and turning it into a springboard for Armenian nationalists' attempts to destabilize Russia's diversely populated Caucasian provinces was not a distant possibility. Thus, cultivating clients among the Kurds, especially those taking refuge in Iran, could bolster its position among the majority Muslim Kurds of East Anatolia in its competition with potential great power rivals.<sup>607</sup>

Regardless of Russia's policies and its influence in shaping the Kurdish autonomist movement, the Kurdish leadership's vision of a future Kurdish political entity emerged in reaction to the aspirations of the Armenian communities. Granted both Abdürrezzak and Hussein Pasha and a number of other Kurdish leaders in the previous decades, such as Sheikh Ubeydullah, had made occasional overtures to the Armenian communities to make common cause and combine efforts to secure their communal rights. However, fundamental differences in ways of life and sectarian affiliations to rival imperial states dictated pursuits of divergent aspirations that were simultaneously exploited by competing powers. As İpek Yosamoğlu has argued in the context of Ottoman Macedonia, "the men and women of letters, and young political activists—understood well the need to recast [nationalism] in a new and overtly religious language."<sup>608</sup>

From the initial collisions between the Ottoman Empire and Russia since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, religion had become the site of colonial encounter. Throughout the previous century, Russia had continuously framed its frequent contests with the Ottomans in a sectarian idiom, whereby Christian communities had become the primary pretext for

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<sup>607</sup> Reynolds, "Abdürrezzak Bedirhan," 429–30.

<sup>608</sup> Yosmaoğlu, *Blood Ties*, 5.

Russia' drive for territorial annexation. Simultaneously, Ottoman reform projects, pursued voluntarily or imposed by European powers, had been adopted to improve the material conditions of Christian groups. Such reform initiatives, which emerged from the European discourse of a Christian-centered modernity, gradually endowed these communities with a special status as Christians, rather than imperial subjects.

By the turn of the twentieth century, when Russian encroachments had come very close to causing the partition of East Anatolia, such Christian-focused reform projects were causing major dilemmas for both the rival empires and the local communities alike. The national awakening of the Armenians, and to a lesser degree, Nestorians had transformed their aspirations into a conceptual framework that could no longer be easily reconciled with the idea of empire with its characteristic features of vague boundaries and diverse populations. At the end of the long 19<sup>th</sup> century, some three decades after the Congress of Berlin had officially recognized ethnicity as the primary principle for political sovereignty, these communities sought exactly what the great powers, led by Russia, now wanted to suppress. A nationalist Armenian movement in East Anatolia held the potential to destabilize Russian rule in the Caucasus, and in East Anatolia in the event of an Ottoman state collapse and Russia's extension of rule to the region.

Moreover, from the Russian officials' perspective, the tribal organization of the Kurdish communities, a perennial source of anxiety for Iranian and Ottoman imperial states, now represented a defect to be remedied. The Kurdish tribes needed to be deployed on a wider communal or national scale to prove effective against the threat that Armenian nationalism posed to Russia' interests in the region including imperial frontier security. Russia had already occupied Azerbaijan and was poised to take over the administration of East Anatolia. If nomadic Kurds were to fall under Russian rule, they needed to be settled and assimilated into the Russian culture and civilization. Similarly, if

they were to be positioned as a counterweight to Armenian national demands, they needed to develop a more cohesive communal consciousness under better organized leadership. In their tribal state, the Kurds could hardly be mobilized for effective military, political or economic purposes.

This imperial outlook dovetailed with Abdürrezzak's and Hussein Pasha's own local interests to bring the Kurds together and form a *beylik* under their own leadership. However, since the national idea had not spread among the Kurdish tribes due to a general lack of literacy and limited economic and cultural contacts with the outside world, Kurdish leaders sought alternatives. The most effective alternative lay in their neighbors' competing communal aspirations. Abdürrezzak and Hussein Pasha could play on Kurdish fears of Armenian ascendancy to mobilize the Kurds on a single front and this was rooted in the entrenchment of a sectarian culture that had gradually emerged at the intersection of great power rivalry, missionary encounter, and Ottoman reform initiatives, and the numerous challenges associated with the making of the Ottoman-Iranian boundaries. Molyneux-Seel's report on Abdürrezzak's idea of autonomy for the Kurds is instructive as it shows how Abdürrezzak's approach to the project of Kurdish autonomy was inextricably tied to the aspirations of the Armenians.

When Abdul Rezak visited these parts two years ago [1911] he stated his opinion that at that time it was impossible to raise the Kurds in a united revolt, but that if ever the question of an Armenian autonomy was mooted the Kurds would then unite to protest their national existence. It is therefore possible that having regard to the exaggerated reports spread among the Kurds regarding the reforms demanded and expected by the Armenians, the present moment may have been thought a favourable one for attempting a general rising of the Kurds.<sup>609</sup>

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<sup>609</sup> Molyneux-Seel to Lowther, Van May 8, 1913, no. 12, *Records of the Kurds*, Vol. 4, 556.

The aspirations of the Kurdish communities, when perceived as a whole, i.e., as a ‘nation’ by their leadership, could only be marshalled as an effective force on a united front in opposition to that of the Armenians. Hence Abdürrezzak’s statement in his manifesto:

If the Kurds do not succeed in establishing their rights and privileges, I tell you from now that the first thing will be the collection of arms, disarming the Kurds and the ruin of Sheikhs, Ulemas, Beys, and Aghas, and then how will the ignorant Kurds be able to protect their rights against the rich but immoral Armenians.

Oh Kurds! do you wish your courage to be despised, your religion, nation and fatherland to be ruined? If not, know that now the Kurds, Seyids, Ulemas, Sheikhs, noblemen, learned people, statesmen, beys and aghas, rich and poor have formed a committee and have sworn to protect the religion, nation and the fatherland with their blood. In order not to be “rayas” to Armenians we must do the following.<sup>610</sup>

Abdürrezzak outlined six steps to secure the rights of the Kurds. First, to take up arms to prevent the granting of the six *vilayets* to the Armenians. Second, to collaborate with friendly Ottoman officials and to punish ‘traitors’ to the cause of the nation. Third, to kill collaborationists. Fourth, to form a revolutionary committee from Kurdish tribal chiefs. Fifth, to form an interim government to administer the nation. Sixth, to notify the great powers of the formation of the Kurdish interim government.<sup>611</sup>

Due to the sore lack of a national consciousness among the Kurds, the only alternative before the Kurdish leadership was to promote the idea that the CUP regime was offering the Armenians a special autonomous status. In light of the CUP regime’s recent increase of the sheep tax and adoption of harsh measures against the Hamidiye chiefs and religious sheikhs such as Seyyid Taha, the Kurds readily gave in to the fear that the “kiafir” [infidel] leaders of the new regime in Istanbul were conniving with the

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<sup>610</sup> Justin McCarthy et al., *The Armenian Rebellion at Van* (Salt Lake City, Utah: University of Utah Press, 2006), 283.

<sup>611</sup> McCarthy et al., 283–84.



Armenians against the Kurds' "national existence." As the vice-consul of Van reported, "The events at Jezira and Midiat are said to have been caused by the emissaries of Hussein Pasha (Bedr Khan) who gave out that an Armenian principality was about to be established and called upon the Kurds to rise in revolt to protect their national existence."<sup>612</sup>

Thus, as it logically follows, since the Armenians were Christians and backed by Christian great powers *for being different as Christians*, and since the Unionist government had been enforcing its secular policies across the empire, it was inevitable for any large-scale conflict between the Kurds and the state or between the two groups to descend into sectarian strife. Such an outcome soon materialized in April 1914 in Bitlis when a certain Mullah Selim staged a major revolt against the CUP regime on an explicitly religious platform, asking for the restoration of the sharia laws and the re-empowerment of the Kurdish sheikhs. This intercommunal chasm, caused by the defensive nationalism of the Kurdish leadership and aided and abetted by the Russians, would soon result in a devastating conflict across the Russo-Ottoman-Iranian borderlands during World War I. Sectarian atrocities would assume a particularly ugly turn on a massive scale as the imperial hostilities would be intentionally framed by the Unionist regime as a war between Islam and Christendom.

To put it differently, in light of the Armenian and Kurdish leadership's propaganda against Muslim 'fanaticism' and Armenian 'conspiracies' with great powers, respectively, Kurds and Armenians inevitably saw each other at polar opposites. For the Armenians, Ottoman concessions to the Kurds in the form of special privileges, as demonstrated by the establishment of the Hamidiye Light Cavalry Corps, were viewed as

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<sup>612</sup> Molyneux-Seel to Lowther, Van, April 4, 1913, no. 9, *Records of the Kurds*, Vol. 4, 576.

conspiracies by a fanatical Muslim sovereign to uproot the Armenian community for being Christians. For the Kurds, regardless of the legitimacy of the Kurdish fear of an impending Armenian autonomy under great power aegis, such a privileged status to a minority group was deemed an existential threat to the Kurds as a religious or 'national' community. Kurdish communities perceived the great power-led reform projects as a threat and reacted based on that perception.

Meanwhile, the competing states, locked in a fierce rivalry over frontier security, sought short-term solutions to the chronic intercommunal problems they had helped to create in the first place. Thus, just like the Ottomans had stoked Kurdish fears in the past and would do so again during the war, Russia similarly exploited these fears in order to create a pervasive sense of communal solidarity among the Kurds as a barrier against the realization of Armenian autonomy. In other words, while Russian consuls in East Anatolia, Istanbul, and St. Petersburg vigorously promoted the Armenian reform project for their own interests, they sought to undermine this same project through inflating Kurdish fears and helping Kurdish leaders to destabilize Ottoman rule in Anatolia.

The result of these seemingly contradictory policies was a perplexing situation in which, during the Balkan wars and up through the first half of 1914, the Ottomans seemed to be assisting Armenians against Kurdish efforts for self-rule even as they strove to inspire Kurdish opposition to Armenian demands for reforms. As Molyneux-Seel surmised, "it is possible that the Turks themselves, unconsciously forwarding Russian aims, may have originated the scare among the Kurds of an Armenian autonomy with a view to demonstrating to the Powers the infeasibility of such a concession, and that subsequently the effervescence created passed the limits intended, and called for

suppression.”<sup>613</sup> In the same vein, Russia’s conduct towards the Kurds during the Balkan wars and up until the outbreak of World War I seemed inconsistent on the surface. However, as Michael Reynolds has argued, the logic guiding tsarist and Ottoman policies was short-term imperial security. Reynolds has articulated the argument well, thus, it is worth quoting him at length:

The fundamental aspirations of the two peoples were too far apart to reconcile, especially under conditions of fundamental uncertainty about the future. The conflict between these groups was the prime driver of instability in the region. “The Armenian question,” as one Russian consul wrote, “was always the Kurdish–Armenian [question], since the Armenians suffered and suffer precisely from the Kurds under the weakness and incapacity (intended or not intended—that is also a large question) of the Turkish authorities.” Russian officials made use of the duality. To European audiences, they pointed to the threat posed to Armenians by Kurds, whereas among themselves they worried more about the Armenian threat to Russia. In their execution of policy, however, they could not but help muddle these two perspectives.<sup>614</sup>

In 1914, the two communities were utterly divided as the fundamental aspirations of the two communities had developed in opposition to one another. The Treaty of Berlin had specifically asked for the protection of Armenians against depredations of Kurds and Circassians, thus officially recognizing the inchoate aspirations of the Armenian people in opposition to that of the Kurds. In the following decades, Ottoman reforms did little to meet the Armenian expectations. Ottoman reforms, Molyneux-Seel observed, failed to “touch fundamentally what is known as the “Armenian question” or what more correctly should be described as the “Kurd question.”<sup>615</sup> The Ottomans faced too many monumental challenges on different fronts for any of their short-term reform projects to produce effectual results. In the wake of the 1877-78 Russo-Ottoman war, frontier security concerns had come to overshadow the question of reforms. The Ottomans had

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<sup>613</sup> Molyneux-Seel to Lowther, Van July 9, 1913, no. 18, *Records of the Kurds*, Vol. 4, 568.

<sup>614</sup> Reynolds, “Abdürrezzak Bedirhan,” 441.

<sup>615</sup> Molyneux-Seel to Lowther, Van July 9, 1913, no. 18, *Records of the Kurds*, Vol. 4, 569.

taken numerous steps to resolve the Kurdish-Armenian question but they had all come to naught. Among these steps were:

suppression of the Kurds by spasmodic punitive expeditions, the forcible restitution of lands by the Kurds to the Armenians, the arming of the Armenian population by the Taschnakistn, the policing of the entire country by detachments of gendarmes or soldiers; none of these will bring about permanent good relations between Kurds and Armenians, since the source of the evil remains untouched. The source of the evil is the maintenance of feudal conditions among the Kurds and the influence exercised by the religious sheikhs.<sup>616</sup>

The panacea proposed by the vice-consul of Van was for the Ottoman government to settle the tribes permanently and to free them from the yoke of their tribal chiefs and religious heads. Point well taken, but that was precisely what the Ottomans had variously tried with different degrees of success since the extension of Ottoman imperial power to the region in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, Sultan Abdülhamid II's institution of the Hamidiye corps and the occupation of the northwestern frontier districts of Iran had been partially intended to fulfill this same goal of settling the tribes and incorporating them within the body politic of the state. However, the principal challenge to Ottoman success was that its centralization policies had, in one way or another, alienated one of the two primary communities of the region.

The Armenians had been the losers under the Hamidian rule specifically because the great powers had undertaken to fulfil the functions of the Ottoman state vis-à-vis the Armenians. Such a transfer of responsibility for a community inhabiting a region that remained tenuously under Ottoman control unintentionally transformed the Armenian community into dangerous European protégés who expectedly and rightly looked to the outside world for redress as no help was forthcoming from their own state. The Unionist regime's reversal of the Hamidian policies in favor of vigorous efforts to implement the

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<sup>616</sup> Ibid.

long-promoted reforms also seriously undermined the state's legitimacy among Kurds. Still worse for the peaceful resolution of the conflict, Russia resurrected the Armenian question for its own imperialist objectives that arose from a fierce international state competition, as it simultaneously endeavored to undermine the very same reform project through supporting a Kurdish movement in opposition to the Armenian one.

By the time the world war started in Europe, the Unionists had managed to eliminate much of the Kurdish opposition leadership through assassination tactics and small-scale military encounters. Mir Mihe, Said Bey, and a cousin of Hussein Pasha of Jazirah were killed by assassins. Hussein Pasha himself had died suddenly, leading to the unraveling of the autonomist Kurdish movement in East Anatolia as there was little grassroots support for it. And the Unionists had fallen back on the policy of investing in the sectarian identity of the Kurds by re-powering friendly sheikhs such as Abdulkadir Effendi. Thus, before the Ottomans officially declared war at the end of October 1914, the Kurdish sheikhs had started their propaganda campaign of *jihad* in the name of the caliph of Islam against Russian infidels and their local allies. In light of decades of propaganda on sectarian grounds that Kurds belonged to the sultan on the grounds of their religious distinction in contrast to Shi'is and Christians, the Kurds of Iran were poised to look westward to their Ottoman brethren and sheikhly leadership. The persistent presence of violence in the borderlands, which had gradually transformed intertribal frictions into sectarian strife between communities, identified by religious distinction, facilitated the Ottoman objectives of mobilizing the Kurds against the Armenian and Nestorian Christians of Van and Iran. Russian support for the Nestorians and creating militias out of their ranks, which engaged with the Kurdish tribes before the war, charged the borderland communities with a desire to wreak vengeance on their long-

standing neighbors, who were now perceived as sectarian foes collaborating with infidel powers, be it Ottoman or Russian.

Thus, when the war broke out, in the first attack on the Urmia plain on January 2, 1915, hundreds of Nestorians were massacred, while thousands were also taken captive and driven off into the outlying villages and towns. The devastation was colossal. The Nestorians found a chance to retaliate when the Russian armies retook Urmia in May 1915, unleashing a vengeance-killing spree on the part of the Nestorian militias. The mutual hostilities, with some ebb and flow, continued until the end of the war when brutalized communities once again turned on each other, this time to seize control of the Urmia plain and make it their own. When Ismail Agha Simko killed Mar Shimun by stratagem in March 1918, his successor, the Nestorian militias, led by Petros Agha, massacred thousands of Shi'i and Sunni Muslims in Salmas, Urmia, and Savujbulagh. Finally, when the Ottoman armies occupied Azerbaijan for the last time in 1918, they authorized a mass slaughter of the Nestorians and forced the survivors into permanent exile in British Iraq.

## Conclusion:

When the First World War broke out in August of 1914 in Europe, foreign inspectors were touring East Anatolia with the aim of making preparations to set up a European-governed administration in the Ottoman six provinces of East Anatolia. In order to check the impending possibility of losing East Anatolia to Russia, the Unionists had decided to relax their centralization policies after the severe punishment of the rebels in Bitlis in April 1914. The CUP leaders also tried to appease the Kurds through subsidies, appointing Kurdish leaders in the government, and urging Istanbul's Kurds to use their influence to win over their alienated brethren in Anatolia. Meanwhile, the Unionists continued to pursue short-term tactics such as assassinations of prominent Kurdish rebel leaders across the border in Azerbaijan.<sup>617</sup> In July, they also extended profuse assurances to other rebel leaders such as Seyyid Taha and the Sheikh Abdussalam Barzani to induce them to return to their lands in Ottoman territory.<sup>618</sup> Enlisting the support of notable Kurdish sheikhs such as Abdulkadir of Nawchia and his son Abdullah proved highly effective in drawing the Kurds back to the Ottoman fold as they embarked on an extensive religious propaganda campaign, calling on the Kurds to stand in solidarity with the armies of the sultan-caliph under the banner of Islam against an infidel Russia. Around July and August, conscription efforts also spiked, which even extended across the border into Iran. In August, the Ottoman consul in Urmia posted

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<sup>617</sup> Mir Mahe was killed in an expedition in November and his body was put on display in Van. Said Bey was assassinated in Azerbaijan close to the Turkish frontier, together with his nephew Islam Bey and his chief follower Haidaranli Yusuf. A certain Abdulkadir Bey, an agent of the CUP from Istanbul came to Van and hired Haji Bekiroghlu Mahmud, a friend of Said Bey, to assassinate Said Bey who was described by the British vice-consul of Van, Smith, as a capable leader, who did not target Armenians but focused on eliminating CUP affiliates. Suleiman Bey Bedirhanizade was assassinated in June 1914 on his way to Jazire by direct orders of the Unionists. The majority of the venerated sheikhs and mullahs of Khizan who participated or were suspected of having a hand in the insurrection were court-martialed and executed in May 1914.

<sup>618</sup> Beaumont to Grey, Therapia, July 28, 1914, *Records of the Kurds*, Vol. 4, 687-88.

notes on walls around the town, calling on Ottoman subjects between 18 and 50 years of age to report for enrolment in the army.<sup>619</sup>

Towards the end of August, the Ottomans assembled a considerable number of irregular Kurdish forces on the borders with Azerbaijan, prompting Russian authorities to respond in kind by increasing troops, which were primarily comprised of Georgians and Armenians.<sup>620</sup> Just like the Ottomans forced Kurdish tribesmen into forming militias by persuasive, deceptive, and coercive measures, the Russians also tried to create a united Christian front against Kurdish attacks by stepping up pressure on the Nestorians of different denominations to accept the Russian church as the only legitimate ecclesiastical body.<sup>621</sup> Russian authorities also started persecuting the Muslim residents of Urmia on charges of suspicion of cooperation with the Iranian *fedayi* bands collaborating with the Ottomans under Amir Hishmat [Sai'd al-Mamalik] and Mashhadi Baghir.<sup>622</sup>

Towards the end of September, rumors trickled into the city of a proclamation of a *jihad*, which was being promulgated by Fazil Ferik Pasha among the Iranian Kurds.<sup>623</sup> On September 22, 1914, the Shikak tribes of Somai and Baradost under Ismail Agha Kerdar, who had been driven across the border by Simko in the previous year and had recently returned, declared their allegiance to the CUP regime and made a concerted attack upon the Russian-backed chiefs of Kotur and Somai, Simko and Tamar Agha Shikak. Ismail Agha Kerdar's Shikaks also managed to capture the fugitive Sheikh Abdussalam Barzani and handed him over to the Ottoman authorities for execution.<sup>624</sup> In

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<sup>619</sup> Shedd to Paddock, Urumia, August 29, 1914, File no. 800, USNA, RG 84.

<sup>620</sup> Shedd to Paddock, Urumia, August 26, 1914, File no. 800, USNA, RG 84.

<sup>621</sup> Ibid.

<sup>622</sup> Shedd to Paddock, Urumia, September 22, 1914, File no. 800, USNA, RG 84.

<sup>623</sup> Shedd to Paddock, Urumia, September 11, 1914, File no. 800, USNA, RG 84.

<sup>624</sup> Shedd to Paddock, Urumia, September 22, 1914, File no. 800, USNA, RG 84; See also Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alaos-Saltaneh, to Ambassador of Turkey, October 7, 1914, no. 10, in *Empire de Perse, Neutralite Persane* (1919), 7.



October, before Sultan Mehmed V and the sheikh al-Islam of Istanbul would issue official declarations of *jihad*, relatives of Seyyid Abdulkadir of Nawchia were reported to be already agitating for *jihad* in Savujbulagh.<sup>625</sup>

Such Kurdish restiveness, led to Iranian protestations and declarations of neutrality, and demands for evacuation of Iranian territory by the belligerents. However, the Russians argued that it was “impossible to withdraw the Russian troops from Azerbaijan as Persia was in a state of decomposition and nothing but the presence of Russian forces in Azerbaijan prevented it from being occupied by the Turks.”<sup>626</sup> The Ottomans replied similarly that if Russia was not ready to withdraw its troops, the Ottomans could not consider Iranian territory as neutral. Thus, Russia deployed a large number of Russian troops in Mergawar, Tergawar, Somai, and Baradost, panicking Kurdish villagers into flight towards the borders, where they were barred by Ottoman troops from crossing into safety. “Some Kurds are being caught and their villages are being destroyed and their property, so far as any is left in the villages is being seized,” Shedd reported with an air of confidence in Russian superiority.<sup>627</sup>

With such imperial propaganda and instrumentalization of religion as a means to achieve frontier security over decades, the borderlanders went to war on opposite side, viewing the conflict between empires as a sectarian war on the local level. On January 1, 1915, William A. Shedd reported that the Kurds, now in possession of Solduz, had moved further north towards Urmia reaching Dol, where they clashed with a four-hundred-strong Russian force reinforced by several hundred Nestorian irregulars. A sheikh holding a green banner, insignia to represent the war as one fought for Islam, led

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<sup>625</sup> Gaunt, Beṭ-Şawoce, and Donef, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors*, 63.

<sup>626</sup> Buchanan to Grey, St. Petersburg, October 3, 1914, no. 478, *Records of the Kurds*, Vol. 5, 7.

<sup>627</sup> Shedd to Paddock, Urumia, October 17, 1914, File no. 800, USNA, RG 84.

the Kurds. The Kurds charged against the Russian lines as they let out chants of *Allahu Akbar* [God is great]. Before they reached the Russian lines, the charging Kurds fell like leaves to the ground at the fire of a machine-gun. By day end, between two and eight hundred Kurds had been killed with some five hundred tallied up as wounded by different accounts received by Shedd from the Russian consul and a Russian physician. Karani Agha, the powerful chief of the Mamash and the supreme Kurdish lord in the regions south of Urmia, had dispatched a letter to the Russian consul, Vidensky, in which he warned him to either accept Islam or make his departure from the country. Karani Agha also boastfully spoke of Turkish and German advances in Russia and the Caucasus.<sup>628</sup>

Surrounded by five thousand Kurdish troops in the south with Karani Agha at their head, another five thousand to the west in Baradost, accompanied by five hundred Ottoman officers, and a considerable independent force stationed at Shamdinan, the Russians decided to withdraw from Azerbaijan without giving any advanced notice to the missionaries in charge of the Christian population. Their departure became final when news reached them that the Kurds had broken through Russian and Iranian defenses at Miandoab in the south. No sooner had the Russians withdrawn than the Kurdish and Ottoman onslaught began. The *ashiret* Kurds descended *en masse* upon the Shiite, Sunni, and especially the Christian villagers of the Urmia and Salmas plains on January 2, 1905, wreaking indiscriminate havoc on the life and property of the inhabitants. Pillage, abduction of Christian women, and mass murders continued until the Ottoman officers arrived and checked the atrocities in the city. Out in the country, however, depredations continued unabated. American missionaries such as Dr. Harry Packard were able to save about three thousand Christian lives in Geogtapa village through negotiations with Karani

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<sup>628</sup> Shedd, Urumia, 1 January 1915 to Paddock, Tabriz, USNA, RG 84, Tabriz, 1915, file 800.

Agha Mamash, while around ten thousand Christian refugees took shelter at the American mission premises in Urmia.<sup>629</sup> On January 8th, 1915, the Kurds, led by Mukhtar Bey Shamkhal, reached Tabriz and took control of the capital of the strategic province of Azerbaijan, outflanking the Russian Caucasus from the south temporarily before they were dispelled in a matter of weeks<sup>630</sup>

Amidst the Ottoman occupation of Urmia which lasted until May 1915, the missionaries took control of the Christian affairs as their mission premises turned into a sanctuary for thousands of terrorized Christians as well as thousands of starving Kurdish and Azeri villagers. Their relief and medical work saved many lives from murder, disease, and starvation. The American missionary doctor's position was of considerable significance. Dr. Packard had successfully built inroads into the Kurdish country by establishing good relations with the Kurdish chiefs. On many occasions, he had offered his coveted medical services to Kurdish notables and their families, through which he had earned Kurdish goodwill and a strong negotiating power to intercede on behalf of the Christians when needed. His sympathetic attitude towards the Kurds, clashed with that of Shedd, who, as a reverend, had developed stronger sympathies towards the local Christians at the expense of the majority Muslim population he had come to regard as fanatical and uncivilized. This divergence of opinion among the missionaries reveals the increasing complexity that characterized the American mission's position as the war progressed.

When the Russians reoccupied Urmia in May 1905, a series of counter-atrocities ensued. Enraged by the violent treatment they had received at the hands of the Kurds and their Shiite allies in Urmia, the returning Nestorians' predisposition to take revenge could

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<sup>629</sup> Packard, *The Story of Our Missions in Persia*, 8–9.

<sup>630</sup> Shedd, Urumia, January 15.

hardly be controlled by the Russian authorities, were they even convinced of the expedience of doing so. Systematic raids into Kurdish and other Sunni villages around Urmia were conducted. The Nestorians' decision to retrieve looted property quickly turned violent as they took full advantage of their position of power under Russian protection. To exacerbate such a state of affairs, the Russian authorities helped along as they immediately proceeded to confiscate the property of the urban elite, chief among whom were the grand Shi'i cleric Mirza Masih, who had fled the city to Tehran upon receiving news of an impending Russian return.<sup>631</sup> The Russians ruled the city with an iron fist until the October Revolution, which led to an abrupt withdrawal of Russian military from the region. The vacuum gave rise to another series of massacres as rival communities competed for political and military supremacy and control of land and resources. In March 1918, Simko Agha Shikak treacherously killed Mar Shimun in the same way that the authorities of Azerbaijan had murdered his own brother. Intercommunal violence reached unprecedented heights as the Nestorians embarked on a revenge killing spree in Salmas, Urmia, and Savujbulagh. Agha Petros led the atrocities while William Shedd, the head of the American mission and the honorary vice-consul in Urmia, redirected relief funds to purchase of weapons and ammunitions for the besieged Nestorians. Finally, the Ottoman armies made one last bid for supremacy over Azerbaijan, in the course of which, thousands of Nestorians were massacred as they tried to make their escape from Urmia into British-controlled territory in the south. They were never to return to their homeland. The Kurdish tribes of the region came to dominate the politics of the region until 1922 under Simko Agha Shikak, who sought to carve a Kurdish state. His ambitions were never realized as the Iranian modernized armies of a

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<sup>631</sup> Labaree, Urumia, 7 June 1915 to Paddock, Tabriz, USNA, RG 84, Tabriz, 1915, file 800.

rising Reza Khan crushed and decimated the Kurdish forces, driving Simko into exile. Simko Agha was finally lured back into Iran and killed treacherously on Reza Shah's orders in 1931.

This dissertation started out with the objective to steer clear of nationalist and teleological narratives centered around the questions of culpability and justice associated with the Armenian Genocide of 1915 and the failure of the Kurdish nationalist to carve a state from the rump of the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Iran. It also sought to narrow the focus to a smaller geographic location on both sides of the frontier in order to illustrate the gradual shifts in communal boundaries and visions as the region gradually became the focus of imperial state scrutiny, endowing this peripheral region with more strategic significance. The investigative approach revealed that intercommunal relations changed over time as a result of multiple factors, which ultimately played out on the site of religion as the concept itself emerged in consequence of new understandings of community, sovereignty, subjecthood, and belonging.

As the *tanzimat* started in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as a result of the advent of colonial powers such as Britain and Russia, the Kurdish sociopolitical structure underwent a massive transformation, with the dynastic rule giving way to retribalization. The shattered structures of Kurdish political entities in South East Anatolia and northwest Iran along the northwestern Ottoman-Iranian frontiers, a new set of power brokers in the form of Naqshbandi sheikhs emerged with a radically different communal vision that was firmly grounded in governance based on a local understanding of the *sharia* laws of Sunni Islam. The emergence of such a novel vision, which was modern in outlook, occurred at the intersection of Ottoman *tanzimat* reforms and its projected and desired reconfigurations of social relations to serve a revitalized and modernized hierarchical Islamic state. Sheikh Ubeydullah's movement was analyzed within the efforts of rival

imperial states to make the boundaries even as they sought to reconfigure their nationality laws. The Iranian and Ottoman efforts to transition to a new era in which the imperial identities of subjects were being recast within an ambiguous space, were constantly compromised by great power rivalry over extending influence and conquest in the region. Thus, Ottoman and Iranian efforts to penetrate the periphery and endow its subjects with their new conceptions of nationality and subjecthood were fiercely contested by rival powers. As a result, as the Ottoman Empire and Iran increasingly lost their control over their Christian and Sunni subjects, respectively, they resorted to investing in their borderland subjects' religious identity in an effort to strengthen their loyalties to their states. As it was demonstrated, both the shahs and the Ottoman sultans self-styled themselves as protectors of Shi'i and Sunni subjects across their imperial frontiers. This trend was preceded and more than powerfully matched by the colonial powers' efforts to win over Christian loyalties.

At the intersection of divergent and competing colonial, imperial, and local conceptions and visions of self and community, religion became the forum through which political claims were staked. As the great powers seized Ottoman territory under the pretext of protecting Christians, so did the Ottomans and Iranians. However, their diminished sovereignty opened up the space for a great deal of cross-border violence as the local communities came to adopt the very parameters through which the rival empires debated the subjecthood status of their overlapping border populations. The unique position of the Armenians in divided polities between Russia, the Ottoman Empire, and Iran exposed them to a remarkably diverse set of cultural, economic, and socio-political structures and ideologies, especially as the Armenian émigré population adopted the national idea to stake communal claims. Nevertheless, since Armenian political activists sought to and could only successfully mobilize their coreligionist in East Anatolia by

appealing to their religious understanding of the world, their nationalism, much like elsewhere in the Balkans, emerged in tandem with the transformation, and in fact, the construction of religion as a new concept for staking political claims. The proliferations of foreign missions and their evangelical efforts and the reconfigurations of the Armenian church structures in both Russia and the Ottoman Empire aided the process of nationalization but not desacralization of national identities.<sup>632</sup>

Moreover, the Armenian national consciousness was so inexorably tied to the great-power-led reform schemes that they could not imagine the successful achievement of progress and equality within what the Europeans had described as a despotic Muslim empire inherently resistant to reforms. The Armenians, thus, inspired by the precedence set in by the great power-supported nationalisms in the Balkans, actively sought to use discursive and physical violence to portray the Ottoman Empire as fanatical and anti-Christian. Such notions led to armed insurrection and infiltration of East Anatolia through Iranian territory.

To neutralize the menace posed by the Armenian raids, especially after most of the Ottomans' rich Balkan possessions were gone, the new Sultan Abdülhamid II took his predecessors' nationality policies to a new level by investing more profoundly in the sectarian affiliation of the Kurds to the Ottoman state. With this idea in mind, he created the Hamidiye Cavalry Corps as a counter to European-led reform schemes for the Armenians. The Hamidiye institution opened up the space for the Kurdish chiefs to increase their wealth, power, and prestige as they also became more incorporated into the state by settling on agricultural lands that they seized from Armenians. The project, having thus succeeded, was extended into Iran in order to resolve the border question and

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<sup>632</sup> Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, 5.

match the frontiers of the emergent modern Ottoman state with those of a presumed Sunni caliphate. In the process, land patterns underwent a great shift as Sunni Kurds were encouraged to displace Shi'is and Christians and settle in their lands. New sectarian identities gradually emerged between Kurds and Shi'is and Nestorians as violent clashes between the communities spiked under the Ottoman occupation and the Iranian revolution. As the Iranian revolutionary ethos helped construct an emotive patriotic notion of the nation centered around the frontier of the state, the Kurds, firmly in alliance with the occupying Ottoman forces, were left out of the imagined nation and thus further alienated.

The subsequent Russian occupation of the region gave rise to a whole set of new developments as, on one hand, an inchoate Kurdish nationalist consciousness was promoted by Kurdish notables under Russian aegis, and, on the other hand, the Kurdish communal boundaries had been more distinctively redrawn on a sectarian basis through the efforts of the sheikhly families and the Hamidiye chiefs. The attempts by the Unionist regime to strike a balance between Kurdish and Christian communities in East Anatolia backfired as the two communities' aspirations had developed in opposition to one another. As a result, Armenian nationalism, which was one and the same as Armenian sectarian identity from the Kurdish perspective, became the foil for the Kurdish leadership. Thus, leading Kurds like Abdürrezzak Bedirhan could only hope to mobilize a discordant Kurdish society by appealing to the fear of the Kurdish tribes against the imminent formation of an Armenian state by the great powers through Ottoman connivance. The two communities were standing on polar opposites when the war broke out, which allowed Russia and the Ottoman Empire to form sectarian militia groups with devastating consequences.



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