

Ottoman Reforms and Kurdish Reactions in the 19th Century

Di Sedsala XIXem de Reformên Osmanî û Reaksiyonên Kurdan

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PUXTE:

Dewleta Osmanî ji ber ku di seranserê sedsala 19an de hin reformên leşkerî, aborî, îdarî û civakî xistiye meriyetê, mirov dikare vê sedsalê wek sedsala reforman bi nav bike. Ji sala 1514an heta sedsala 19an hevsengiyek di navbera têkiliyên dewleta Osmanî û eşîrên kurdan de hebû. Eşîrên kurdan û dewleta Osmanî li ser rêveberiyê otonom li hev kiribûn û ev rewş ji her du hêlan ve jî hatibû parastin. Lêbelê ji bo dabînkirina lêçûnên leşkerî, bicihkirina modernizasyona burokrasiyê, piştî rakirina Ocaxa Yeniçeriyân sazkirina arteşeke nû û pêdiviyên mirovî mesrefeke mezin derket holê. Ji ber van sedeman têkilî û hevsengiya navborî xera bû û di navbera eşîrên kurdan û navendê de têkoşînek dest pê kir. Ev rewş heta hilweşandina împaratoriye berdewam kir.

Li ser vê rewşa bicihbûyî ya navbera her du aliyan, eşîrên kurdan ji bo parastina pozisyona xwe, ketin nav liv û lebatekê, ev jî nîşan dide ku reformên vê serdemê yê herî girîng reformên îdarî, ango navendîbûniyê bûn. Bi vê agahiyê ez dixwazim vê diyar bikim ku armanca serhildanên eşîrên kurdan ên di sedsala 19an de qewimîne, ne avakirina Kurdistaneke serbixwe bû ku xwe dispart netewperweriya kurdî, berovajî vê yekê, divê ev serhildan wek karvedaneke li hember reforman bêne nirxandin. Di nav vê

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konteksê de serhildana Ebdurrahman Paşa ya sala 1806an, serhildana Mîr Mihemmed Paşayê Rewandizî ya sala 1834an, serhildana Bedirhan Beg a sala 1840an, serhildana Şêx Ûbeydulahê Nehrî ya sala 1880an de pêk hatine, dê ji bo piştrastkirina vê angaşê bên nixandin.

Peyvên Sereke: Reformên osmanî, navendîbûn, eşîrên Kurdan û serhildanên wan, neteweperwerî.

ABSTRACT:

The last century of the Empire can be called a “Reform Century” since throughout the 20th century, the Empire implemented radical reforms covering its military, economic, social and administrative structures. In particular, from 1514 to the beginning of the 19th century, the relationship of Kurdish tribes with the Porte remained in balance and the agreed autonomous status was protected. However, due to greater revenue requirements to meet military expenditure, bureaucratic modernization and an overt requirement for conscription to help support a new army which was to substitute for the abandoned Janissaries units, when the administrative reforms of the Empire were implemented all across the Empire, the silent relationship was broken and the struggle between the Kurdish tribes and the Porte commenced continuing, indeed until the end of the Empire.

From the reforms in administration, in other words, centralization proved to be the most significant as it triggered events which encouraged Kurdish tribal leaders to rebel against the Centre, to protect their long enduring and established positions among their adherents and also against the Centre superseded by the Porte. My argument in providing this information is that the rebellions of the Kurdish Tribes during the 19th century should be considered as reactions towards reforms rather than a preliminary phase of Kurdish nationalism which had as its goal the establishment of a separate Kurdish state. I will consider the cases of the Abdurrahman Pasha Revolt in 1806, the Mir Muhammad Pasha of Rewanduz in 1834, the Bedirhan Pasha Revolt in 1840s and finally the Sheikh Ubeydullah Revolt in 1880 to support this argument.

Keywords: Ottoman reforms, centralization, Kurdish tribes and revolts, nationalism.

1. INTRODUCTION

The last century of the Ottoman Empire passed with intensive questioning by contemporary scholars from both interior and foreign sources. Compared to the European states, the backwardness of the Empire in the realms of military, economy and administration was evident as the Empire remained affiliated with traditional social and military structures. The ruling elite and the sultans of the Empire in the 19th century saw the solution to this backwardness in the modernization of the military and the administrative and economic structure. Due to the reform efforts made to modernize these traditional structures, the 19th century can be labelled as the century of reforms and, as described by İlber Ortaylı, as “the longest century of the Empire” (Ortaylı, 1983). The requirement of reform and military improvement had actually been recognized by the ruling elite as early as the 17th century, but it was not until the late 18th century that the application of radical reforms began. These reforms continued gradually and were still ongoing until the demise of the Empire in 1918 (McCarthy, 1997; Zurcher, 2009). The history of the Empire in its last century was actually largely generated by the reaction of those who were adherents to the traditional ways to the new administration and the new military and economic structures and the counter-reaction of the Ottoman Sultans and governments. Local reactions to central policies is thus crucial for highlighting the changes brought about by the modernization efforts on all subjects of the Empire including, Kurdish subjects.

Kurdish-Ottoman interactions began with the Persian-Ottoman War of 1514 in which mostly Sunni Kurdish tribes¹ sided with the Sunni Ottomans (Sonmez, 2012, p.102) against Shiite Persia². By supporting the Ottoman troops under the command of the Yavuz Sultan Selim I (1512-1520) at Caldiran³ where the war took place, Kurdish tribes were warmly received by the Sultan and in exchange for a tax exception and military duty in cases of need, they gained autonomous⁴ status

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- 1 A study which is giving details of Kurdish tribes of the Ottoman Empire is penned by Mark Sykes in the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, namely *The Kurdish Tribes of the Ottoman Empire* (Sykes, 1908).
 - 2 The Presence of Kurdish People acting with the Ottomans created the Empire’s eastern policy against the Persians in the realms of both religious denominations and security. (Faroqhi, 2004 p.49)
 - 3 It was small a district between the Ottoman and the Persian border. It is now under the sovereignty of Iran.
 - 4 “The majority of Kurdish leaders naturally welcomed reinstatement and willingly accepted an arrangement that gave them the benefit of Ottoman recognition and confirmation of their relatively independent status. In return, they undertook to produce armed and mounted men

which lasted from 1514 until the first decade of the 19th century. According to the regulations established, the governance of the tribes was left to the tribal chiefs and as such the right to govern was passed from father to son through inheritance (McDowall, 2007, p.28).

To some scholars, the administrative structure made the possibility of the uniting of Kurdish people and the growth of nationalistic sentiments difficult and even possibly impossible given the geographic obstacles and tribal loyalty. This administration structure then was deliberately organized by the Sultan Selim I because he had already considered the small possibility that Kurdish forces could pose a threat if they united and fought against him. However, such arguments do not convince as Kurdish tribes had already been separated prior to the Ottomans coming to the region and the Sultan did not actually force any changes on to the traditional Kurdish administrative structure. If he had had such an intention, the Kurdish tribes should have been atomized instead of granting approval to their existing administrative structure. In addition, Idris-i Bitlisi represented not only his tribe but also 17 other Kurdish tribes⁵ when these tribes decided to side with the Ottomans⁶. Thus, the tribal structure of the Kurdish people had already been consolidated before the Ottomans arrived but it remains true that the tribal separation of Kurdish people did inevitably create one of the most fundamental obstacles for the development of a Kurdish national movement during the 20th century (McDowall, 2007; Taspinar, 2005).

to serve the empire when called upon to do so. For a society in which the ruling class lived in the saddle, it must have been an attractive proposition. One should be cautious, however, about notions of reinstatement in terms of a revival of some kind of *status quo ante*. Ottoman formalization of Kurdish amirates must have changed fundamentally the configurations of Kurdish groups, in particular giving the amirs greater authority and security that they had ever before enjoyed.” (McDowall, 2007 p.28)

- 5 There is no exact number of the governorates represented by the main tribes which had gained a sort of autonomy but it is estimated at 16 (McDowall, 1995) or 17. In addition, approximately 400 *ashiret beyliks* were established around Diyarbakir, Van and *Sehrizor*. These governorates and *beyliks* were governed by a chief family and their governance inherently passed from father to son (Yildiz, 1991). There were also several small *beyliks* which were directly under the control of the Porte and governed by the Ottoman officials.
- 6 The Kurdish nationalists consider the revolts of each powerful tribes in the 19th century as a nationalist movement. Yet, they did not see and mention the representation of Kurdish tribes by the one tribal leader in 16th century as a nationalist indication because of that it was an agreement between the Ottomans and the Kurdish people. I am a Kurd, too and to me, the representation of most of the Kurdish tribes by Idris-i Bitlisi seems to me more nationalistic than the other revolts happened in the 19th century.

From 1514 until the beginning of the 19th century, the relationship of the Kurdish tribes with the Porte remained balanced and their agreed upon autonomous status was protected. However, once the administration reforms of the Empire began to be implemented all across the Empire, due to the additional revenue requirements to meet military expenditure and enable bureaucratic reforms and the additional requirement to provide conscripts for a new army to substitute the abandoned Janissaries units, this silent relationship was broken and the political and later armed struggle between the Kurdish tribes and the Porte began and continued indeed until the end of the Empire (Yildiz, 1991; McDowall, 1995).

Taking the European States as a model for modernization firstly in military issues, then in administration and later European culture and modern ideologies began to affect almost all aspects of life. Nationalism, for instance, could be perceived as an ideology which was exported via modernization from Europe into the Empire. This ideology later would become one of the major driving forces behind the separation of various ethnic nations who one by one left the Empire, starting firstly with Greek autonomy and then independence of the national states in the Balkans and the Middle East. Providing a chronological account of the Ottoman reforms and their influence on the Ottoman subjects, specifically on Kurds, will provide a smooth grounding from which the larger research arguments can be built upon.

Therefore, providing a short account of the relevant historical background seems essential in order to properly illustrate the connection between modernization policies, especially those concerned with centralization, and the Kurdish revolts. Presenting this historical background will help to bring to light whether or not Kurdish revolts were driven by nationalism or tribal interests. As such, in the first part of the paper the features of the revolts and the reasons behind them will also be analysed. Following this analysis, the evaluation of these revolts, in other words the relations between Kurdish people and the Empire, will be discussed. Ultimately, I will argue that these revolts automatically increased nationalist sentiments among those of Kurdish ethnic origin and led to an increase in awareness of their distinct ethnic identity. This was especially significant in the Young Turk era when these nationalist sentiments were embodied over Cemiyets (Clubs) (Malmisanij, 2002) in the late Ottoman Empire.

This era, the last two decades of the Empire, is of vital importance, as it illustrates the deep roots of the Kurdish question in Turkey⁷. Kurdish people generally

7 The Kurdish question in Turkey commenced with the denial of distinct ethnic identity of Kurdish people and has continued since the inception of the formation of modern Turkey. The Kurdish struggle for constitutional recognition can be summarised as Kurdish question in Turkey.

acted with their Turkish counterparts, but this does not mean that there was no incremental increase in ethnic conscience among Kurdish people. Eventually, I will argue that Kurdish revolts in the 19th century and the nationalist activities of Kurdish clubs in early 20th century cannot be labelled as nationalist movements but rather as representing a backlash of Kurds towards the Ottoman reforms.

2. SULTAN SELİM III AND ABDURRAHMAN PASHA REVOLT

Despite the fact that the reforms initiatives in this term failed, most Ottoman historians consider the reign of Sultan Selim III (1789-1808) as a prominent starting point of reforms (Shaw & Shaw, 1977; Davison, 1988 p.5; Kinross, 1977 p.415; Palmer, 1993 p.70), since he brought several European scientists and commanders from Europe to train a new army which was referred to as Nizam-i Cedid Ordu (New Order Army) (Gokcek, 1993, p.521). Traditionally, janissaries were the fundamental military force of the Empire. They realised that they would be replaced by the new army so they rebelled against the Sultan Selim III. In that time, the other traditional institutions were allied with the Janissaries, as they knew that the new order would not be restricted to only the army but would later change their position, as well. In this respect, bureaucrats, politicians and most importantly many religious orders and their leaders (ulema⁸) could be seen at the Centre of opposition against reforms. An unofficial alliance among these groups led to a rebellion primarily conducted by Janissaries, which dethroned Sultan Selim III. This rebellion actually served as a symbolic representation of the battle between adherents of traditional structure and of reformist of the Empire as several ayans (provincial notables) in the Balkans such as Bayraktar Mustafa Pasha sought to re-throne Sultan Selim III, but they could not achieve their goal and the rebellion ended with the death of Sultan Selim III (Zurcher, 2009; Cleveland, 2004; Shaw & Shaw, 1977). In short, there was a theatre on the stage and their performers were traditionalists and reformists. In this play, the one who remained standing was the Janissaries symbolizing the traditional military structure.

8 It is a high ranking religious position in the Islamic order. “The ulema attributed their sole authority in the seriat to their competence in science. To enter their ranks a candidate had first to study science that is to acquire the knowledge necessary for a true understanding of the Koran. One of the Ulemas had then to certify their competence. This act of certification was a link in a chain stretching back to the Companions of the prophet Muhammed: “The ulema are heirs to the knowledge of the Prophets” (Inalcik, 1973 p.171). they are religious scholars studying Qur’an, Hadith, and Shariah and coisidered as guardians of the religious rules and community as well as being successors of the Prophet Muhammad (Hourani, 1991 p.158).

One of the first indications of Kurdish reactions towards Ottoman reforms was the rebellion of Abdurrahman Pasha. According to the agreement reached between Yavuz Sultan Selim and the Kurdish tribes, when a leader of a Kurdish tribe died, the right to rule that tribe inherently passed to the son of the previous leader so that the position of leadership would remain in one specific family. However, as part of an initiative to centralize the provinces of the Empire, in 1795, a new decree⁹ was promulgated, which regulated the Ottoman provinces. What the Porte wanted to achieve was the strengthening of the central power over provinces and a curtailment of the power of tribal leaders and local Emirs whom overtly caused a feeling of disquietude among Kurdish locals or provincial authorities (Arfa, 1966). As an indication of that goal, for the first time, the Ottoman administration interfered in the internal affairs of a tribe when Ibrahim Pasha, who was the governor of Süleymaniye district from the Baban Tribe, died in 1805. The Ottomans appointed Halit Pasha who was from a rival family in the same tribe as the governor of the district instead of Abdurrahman Pasha who was the niece of the preceding governor, Ibrahim Pasha. Thereupon, Abdurrahman Pasha rebelled against the Ottomans in 1806 and after two years of struggle, was finally defeated by the Ottoman army (Göktaş, 1991). Despite these facts in several other works, it is claimed that Abdurrahman Pasha rebelled not due to this appointment but as part of a power struggle with the Ottoman governor of Baghdad (Zeki, 2010; Burkay, 1992). The reality however is that the struggle was aimed at preserving and consolidating the power of both Abdurrahman pasha and the Ottomans. Furthermore, his son, Ahmed Pasha rebelled again to take vengeance for his father in 1812 but he was also defeated by the newly established Ottoman army (Burkay, 1992).

In the light of this first interference of the Ottoman into Kurdish tribal affairs, the primary reason for the revolt seems to be that the governor of Süleymaniye felt that his ancestral right to rule his district was violated by the central government, which was against the agreement signed between Yavuz Sultan Selim I and İdris-i Bitlisi (the governor of Bitlis district) on the behalf of Kurdish tribes. Therefore, the characteristic of the rebellion, in this respect, was largely due to tribal politics and hence there was no nationalist feature. Despite this, some Kurdish nationalist authors considered this rebellion to represent the first nationalist movement against the Porte. This interpretation of a 'nationalist' aspect can be loosely supported if several assumptions

9 The Empire was divided into twenty eight provinces. Each of them would be governed by a vizier. These were Adana, Aleppo, Anatolia, Baghdad, Basra, Bosnia, Cildir, Crete, Damascus, Diyar-i Bekir, Egypt, Erzurum, Cidde, Karaman, Kars, Maras, the Mediterranean Islands, the Morea, Mosul, Rakka, Sehr-i Zor, Silistra, Sivas, Trabzon, Tripoli, and Van (Hanioglu, 2008).

are made. For instance, Kurdish emirates were fighting each other as an autonomous administration. Hence, if the Kurdish tribe had won the fight, the end of this struggle could have resulted in the emergence of a Kurdish state. In this regard, a sort of local nationalism could be considered as the primary goal of the rebellion was not to initiate a national liberation movement based on a general nationalist conscience applied to all Kurdish land but rather to keep some specific privileges safe, which can be considered as tribal nationalism (Özoğlu, 2001).

Besides the binding tribal agreement with the Centre, there was also another factor binding these Kurdish tribes to the Centre, namely religion. Due to their shared faith the title of Sultan-Caliph¹⁰ would have been an effective measure which prevented the generation of a wholly national movement against the Porte. As mentioned, one of the main reasons why the Kurdish tribes had sided with the Ottomans against Persia was that they were fellow followers of Sunni Islam. The intertribal relation among Kurdish tribes and playing off the various tribes against each other by the Ottomans constituted another clear reason why a nationalist sentiment was not the main characteristic of the rebels and thus they remained largely of tribal or local character.

3. SULTAN MAHMUT II AND MİR MUHAMMAD REVOLT

Following the first attempt of reforms and interference into Kurdish tribal structure, the reign of Sultan Mahmut II (1808-1839) would bring more radical reforms and hence more radical reactions from the Kurdish tribes. Perhaps his most prominent reform was the abandonment of the Janissaries troops in 1826, which had once been the most powerful army in the world (Ekrem, 1947; Shaw & Shaw, 1977). After this removal of one of the most significant barriers to reforms, his absolute power allowed him to implement more radical reforms in the realm of military, education, administration and religious structure (Cleveland, 2004).

Regarding these reforms, they were military, educational, social and administrative and had some revolutionary features as they helped to change the appearance of the Ottoman Empire from a traditional Empire to a more modern version more in line with the European powers. The first step here was to replace the Janissaries with a new army, namely Asakir-i Mansure-i Muhammediye (Victorious Troops of Muhammad) (Shaw & Shaw, 1977). This was a substantial initiative as it meant that the

10 This title is deriving from Islamic legacy coming from the Prophet Mohammad and the early four Caliphs according to the orthodox Sunni Islam. When the last Abbasid Caliphs died in 1538, the title was taken by Yavuz Sultan Selim I (Alderson, 1956).

entire military power of the Empire was eliminated and re-established. The re-establishment should be considered a revolutionary change, as it served as the beginning of all other reforms and brought with it a number of new change motivating requirements. For instance, there was a substantial need for money and man power as prior requirements to implement such an influential change (Lewis, 2002). Hence, these basic requirements caused significant changes to the taxation system of the Empire. It is not hard to imagine that these changes in taxation and increased conscription demands would not be warmly welcomed by local people. From the perspective of the tribal leaders, these changes meant more interference from the Centre into their internal affairs and further burdens being placed upon them, which inevitably resulted in generating another significant uprising (Köksal, 2006).

In regards education, the Sultan reorganized the modern schools which were associated with providing a military education and which had been founded during the term of the previous Sultan Selim III as part of his modernization agenda. In particular, there was the naval and the military engineering schools formed in 1773 and in 1793, respectively. The vital problem they faced was a severed deficit of qualified staff and a lack of students and as a result expert staffs from Europe were employed to help train a modern army in the schools. To bridge the gaps in teaching at the schools, several students were sent to Europe on the condition that they would come back when graduated and serve as teachers in the two old schools and in several more newly established schools such as Mekteb-i Ulum-i Harbiye (the School of Military Science), a medical school in Istanbul and Muzika-i Hümayun Mektebi (Imperial Music School) established in 1834, 1827 and 1831, respectively (Shaw & Shaw, 1977; Gocek, 1993 p.521). Furthermore, foreign language courses and several more modern subjects were added into curriculum of the traditional schools in order to help train students with the necessary skills for both the low and high ranking posts in the government and for the newly established modern institution (Lewis, 2002).

These developments in the education system of the Empire might seem irrelevant to the Kurdish population but I argue that they are very relevant. For instance, the number of those who were sent to Europe for education increased in later years and some of these students were thus the children of Kurdish tribal leaders. Hence, when they came back they not only took knowledge of the new scientific developments from Europe but also nationalist sentiments and other modern ideologies, such as constitutionalism and liberalism. Whether or not the Sultans of the Empire intended it, these ideas and philosophies would eventually lead to drastic social and political change in the Empire the impact of which would remain influential until the fall of the Empire.

Finally, there were also significant reforms in administration and centralization and these were perhaps the most influential reforms for the Kurdish tribal leaders and notables. During Sultan Mahmud II's term, ministries which fully complied with the European administration style were established. Religious affairs and institutions, for instance were taken under the control of the ministry of religious affairs (Faroqhi, 2000; Davison, 1988). By doing so, one of the fundamental components of power in the Empire was placed under the authority of the Sultan. Police forces were established and taken under the control of the Ministry of Interior Affairs. The newly established army became the military force of the empire under the Ministry of War. Moreover, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was established and embassies and consultancies were opened in the European Capitals (Shaw & Shaw, 1977).

This modernized administration followed the centralization agenda and decisions regarding all issues were left to governors who were directly appointed by the ministry. In the term of Sultan Selim III, new provincial regulation had also promulgated but due to the fact that there was a lack of adequate resources and centralised power such regulation could not be properly implemented. The disagreements between the notables or tribal leaders and the governor of the provinces commenced with these new efforts of centralization¹¹. If they approved the stricter central authority in their area, that noble or tribal leader might be appointed as the governor of the province whereas otherwise the central authorities would try to punish the nobles for their disloyalty (Hanioglu, 2008; Köksal, 2006). In the traditional arrangement, the nobles fulfilled the role of intermediaries acting between the Centre and their subjects. They were in charge of collecting taxes and dealing with local affairs but with centralization, these kinds of traditional political and social roles were sought to be eliminated and transferred to the appointed governors instead. Considering that these traditions had lasted for around three hundred years tradition it is not to predict that the transition from a traditional administration to a modern one would be harsh and contested. Hence, this situation provides the context surrounding the uprisings and rebellions between most of the nobles and the governors of provinces. In the case of Kurdish notables, as seen from the previous reform examples, this change would create a considerable number of rebellions against the Centre and these in turn would be taken as the starting point of Kurdish nationalism by current Kurdish nationalists (Burkay, 1992).

11 It was not only restricted with the Kurdish tribal leaders or notables, but also Serbian, Arab and Anatolian notables were more or less suppressed by the Ottoman government as a requirement of new centralization policy (Shaw & Shaw, 1977 pp.14-15).

In terms of having an accurate calculation for the taxes and conscriptions, Sultan Mahmut II sought to operate a census (Kinross, 1977 p.461). The first initiative was disturbed by the Ottoman-Russia War of 1828-29 but the second one following the war was conducted and completed without any disruptions (McCarthy, 1997). Thanks to these censuses, it was the first time that the Empire had collected a population record which could now be used for multiple purposes, such as conscription and tax collecting. Just as the other major centralization policies disturbed Kurdish nobles and tribal leaders, the censuses generated the same discontent as they realised that these would be used for taxation and conscription purposes.

In terms of communication, Sultan Mahmut II launched an official newspaper which was named *Takvim-i Vekayi* (the Calendar of Events), developed improved infrastructure for the postal service and delivered the Ottoman passports to his subjects, especially to travellers (Hanioglu, 2008). These developments were related to the centralization policy because these reforms allowed for quicker and more organised communication between the provinces and the Centre. The newspaper was also used as propaganda for the new modernization policy. Indeed, all of these reforms were aimed at speeding up centralization. However, it should not be forgotten that the reforms in education and communication paved the way for a rising level of interaction between the Centre and the Kurdish people. Regardless of official goals, these changes also affected Kurdish nobles and tribal leaders by opening their eyes and minds to the new modern world and not only to Istanbul but also to Europe.

To what extent these reforms had influence on the Kurdish notables and tribal leaders are briefly summarized by Özoğlu who stated:

“In the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was going through a process of reformation. In order to face the challenge posed by the West and to meet the financial responsibilities that such an overwhelming restructuring required, the state was desperate to find extra income. Because military conquests, which were the means of Ottoman prosperity in earlier periods, were virtually nonexistent, the most logical way to fill the central treasury was to introduce a centralization policy through which the state would collect taxes directly. This, of course, meant diminishing or destroying the existing power structure, which favoured the local Kurdish rulers. Moreover, the Ottoman centralization also allowed local Ottoman administration to get back at those Kurdish subjects, whose loyalty they did not trust.” (Özoğlu, 2004, p. 60)

These historical factors are outlined in order to help contextualise the Kurdish reactions against the Centre, the centralization policy and more broadly speaking against modernization policies. As is clear from the first example of a Kurdish rebel-

lion, the interference of the Centre into Kurdish traditional tribal politics and the administrative structure resulted in rebellions amongst the powerful Kurdish tribes.

As the resistance was an inevitable aspect of the centralization process, Sultan Mahmut II assigned Rashid Muhammad Pasha (the governor of Sivas district) to launch a military expedition against the semi or fully autonomous hereditary Kurdish governors and if required, the governor of Mosul, İnce Bayraktar Muhammad Pasha and the governor of Baghdad, Ali Rıza Pasha were ordered to assist Rashid Muhammad Pasha. The army under the command of Rashid Muhammad Pasha was equipped with modern artillery and trained in modern military methods (Jwaideh, 2006). This mission's first target was Mir¹² Muhammad Pasha of Rewanduz, the leader of Soran Emirate, who had previously eliminated his rivals in his own family and adjacent tribes.¹³ Furthermore, many Yazidis and a considerable amount of Nestorians suffered from his conquests and ambitious attacks to control as much territory as possible (Jwaideh, 2006). He also defeated the Bahdînan tribe which had had a long history in the Kurdish territory.

In 1834 when the new Ottoman army commanded by Rashid Muhammad appeared in northern Kurdistan it began marching towards the south and managed to effectively crush all of the disobedient tribes along the road. Then when close to Soran district, the Centre of Muhammad Pasha of Rewanduz, the army combined with armies which had come from Mosul and Baghdad. This combined created an undefeatable force when compared with the force at the disposal of Muhammad Pasha of Rewanduz. However, despite such overwhelming superiority their first attack was repelled and they had to withdraw as all of the passages were held by Kurdish forces and as such there was no battle between two groups but there was another narrative about how the battle ended¹⁴ In addition to the strength of the Ottoman army, there was another factor which made Mir Muhammad hesitate to

12 The title of *Mir* means prince who was the first in line after the death or voluntary relinquishing of incumbent notable or tribal chief.

13 His two uncles, Tamir Khan Beg and Yahya beg and his treasury general, Abdullah Agha and then his neighbouring tribes the *Baradost*, the *Shirwan*, the *Surchi*, the *Khoshnaw*, and the *Mamish*.

14 Rashid Muhammad Pasha offered a peace agreement in exchange of reappointment *Mir* Muhammad Pasha as the governor, which was accepted but when Rashid Muhammad Pasha died before completing the process the Ottoman officers did not keep their words and sent him to the Capital and he was on the way of returning to his district he was killed by the Ottoman government (Burkay, 1992; Van Bruinessen, 1978). On the other hand, Ali Rıza Pasha of Mosul personally knew *Mir* Muhammad Pasha so he went to convince him to offer a peace as he did not want Rashid Muhammad Pasha gained a historical success. He achieved his aim and *Mir* Muhammad of Rewanduz consented to go to the Capital under the surveillance of Rashid Muhammad Pasha (McDowall, 1995).

fight, namely a fatwa¹⁵ which stated that those who fought against the army of the Caliphate were infidels. This religious decree weakened his power because religion was one of the fundamental components of Kurdish traditional lives (Yildiz, 1991). This might be the explanation for why eventually they ended their struggle without a battle. After the death of Sultan Mahmut II, there were several more Kurdish tribal rebellions against the Centre but they were all suppressed by Hafiz Pasha, the successor of Rashid Muhammad Pasha.

Eventually, in terms of analysing the revolt from a nationalist approach, despite the fact that it might have aimed to establish an independent political unit or state, this revolt cannot be perceived as a nationalist movement. First of all, Mir Muhammad crushed most of his neighbouring tribes, including one of the largest tribes (the Bahdinan, ethnically Kurdish), instead of calling for unity between the tribes based upon their common ethnicity. Moreover, while all these uprisings by the Kurdish tribes were occurring next to the Bothan district ruled by Bedirhan family, Bedirhan tribe was not involved in the rebellion and there is no record that they were even invited to join. Furthermore, Mir Muhammad was educated by a religious man, Molla Ahmed ibn Adam and as such hesitated to fight when the fatwa forbidding Muslims from fighting against the Caliphate's army was revealed. He could thus be considered a religious leader, or if not, at least a leader who held respect for religion. It seems clear that ultimately his concern for his religion was more important than any nationalist ideals. Collectively, these historical facts offer support for the argument that it was not a nationalist movement but rather a reaction and a result of the centralization policy of the Empire.

4. TANZİMAT REFORMS¹⁶ AND BEDİRHAN PASHA REVOLT

From the point of view of the Empire's ruling elites, the survival of the Empire in the face of the threat of the European powers relied on reforms being carried

15 Fatwa is a religious decree which is generally promulgated by a religious leader.

16 Following the reign of Sultan Mahmut II, an era called *Tanzimat* (reforms) started through promulgation of *Gülhane Hatt-i Şerifi* (the Noble Edict of the Rose Garden) in 1839 and continued until 1871. The main difference of these terms (Sultan Selim III, Sultan Mahmut II and *Tanzimat*) was the degree and intensity of implementation of reforms because of internal and external reasons. Firstly, from the beginning of the nineteenth century, nationalist discourse and sentiments had already influenced the Balkans and triggered to the independence of Greece. Secondly, while this edict which deeply changed traditional structure of the Empire was announced in the capital, the political condition of the Empire was not enough strong to protect itself even from its own provincial notables. The army of Egypt defeated the Ottoman army and reached until *Nizip* (inside of Anatolia) and also foreign powers used the right of Christian minorities to involve into internal politics and so applied pressure to the Empire.

out. These reforms were intended to advance the Empire to the level of the European powers in terms of the military, economy, education and politics. Therefore, in addition to the partially implemented reforms, several fundamental reforms were brought into operation in the Tanzimat era these included: the guarantee of life, honour and property for all subjects, new taxation and conscription systems based on equality and equality for all subjects in law regardless of whether they were Muslims or non-Muslims (Chirol & Eversley, 1924; Lewis, 2002; McCarthy, 1997; Shaw & Shaw, 1977; Zurcher, 2009; Ma'oz, 1968).

In regards military reforms, provincial armies were put under the command of Serasker¹⁷ so that the military power of the governors and nobles in the provinces was reduced. Ironclad warships were purchased from Europe and a modern navy was founded but it lacked qualified staff which decreased its potential and meant that it never became effective in practice. In terms of administration, the importance of the ministries highly increased and a massive bureaucracy¹⁸ appeared in the Empire. Firstly consultative assemblies were introduced and in 1868 this new administration ended up developing the Council of State (Şura-ı Devlet) whose function was legislation and members, both Muslims and Christians, were selected from the list sent from provinces (Shaw & Shaw, 1977 p.79).

The taxation system and provincial administration were two basic reforms areas which had the most influence on the provinces and its inhabitants. Due to the Tanzimat reforms relating to taxation¹⁹, the system of tax farming was superseded by a system of direct collecting by the officials who were called muhassils (accoutres) and appointed directly by the Centre. The goal was that the new system would dramatically increase income and would reduce the burdens on local farmers. Yet, in reality the situation was worsened because there were no adequately qualified people to assign to this task and the local nobles, who had the right to collect taxes, opposed this central control by preventing muhassils from collecting any taxes. When these difficulties were recognised the old system of tax farming was reintroduced.

In terms of the centralization of administration, in 1840-41, the power of the governor was transferred to the commander of provincial armies to deal with the

17 This is a sort of the highest military rank, the head of military.

18 To Walter F. Weiker, major reason of failure of the Ottoman reforms were deficit of qualified bureaucrats and administration skills and those who had a position in reformed administration were at cognitive level, resisting radical reforms as they were a part of traditional prevailing understanding (Weiker, 1968)

19 Only three types of taxes remained: *cizye* (poll tax), *aşar* (tithe) and *mürettebat* (allocation taxes). In this era, sheep tax was also applied to all sorts of farm animals and taxes were determined according to the market value of the animals (Shaw & Shaw, 1977 p.95).

worsening condition caused by the failure of the centrally organized tax collection and to reduce the power of the provincial governors because the Ottomans wanted to avoid the humiliating situation experienced by Muhammad Ali of Egypt²⁰ (Lewis, 2002). In the mid-1850s, the experiences obtained from this type of administration had illustrated clearly its negative influence so that in 1858, new regulations on administration were introduced and again all officers were placed under the control of the governor. Moreover, in 1864, the administration of the provinces were hierarchically divided, these were from top to bottom: vilayet (province), sancak (county), kaza (district), nahiye (rural community) and kariye (village) (Zurcher, 2009; Shaw & Shaw, 1977 p.84). As a component of the centralization policies of the Tanzimat era, communication between the provinces and the Porte were made quicker due to newly built modern roads, telegraph lines and an improved postal system. There were already several railways built by the foreign powers for economic purposes in the western Anatolia but this was also the first time the Ottoman government itself invested in railways with the goal of increasing economic mobility and military transportation between provinces (McCarthy, 1997).

All of these reforms were taken from the European example and hence the Tanzimat reforms can be argued as being the full implementation of the westernization process due to the fact that they directly interfered with areas previously associated with religion. Especially in regard to judicial issues and reforms, there are clear indications of this process, for instance: the establishment of secular courts, taking the religious affairs under the control of the ministries, providing equality to Christians and Muslims in front of the law and so on (Hanioglu, 2008, p. 75).

The stronger and more dedicated centralization²¹ (modernization or westernization) policies of the Empire in the Tanzimat era were revealed during another insurrection from the Kurdish tribes in 1840s, namely the Bedirhan Bey revolt

20 Muhammad Ali was one of the commanders in Balkan forces, when a rebellion of slaves occurred in Egypt, the Ottomans commanded him to repress the rebellion. Once he achieved what he was wanted to do, he was appointed as governor of the Egypt. Yet, as soon as he got much more power, he demanded more areas to rule for himself and also his sons. As a result of this power struggle, Muhammad Ali Pasha fought against the Ottoman army and succeeded to arrive at insight of Anatolia due to the fact that he obtained more modernized and equipped army compare to the Ottoman Army.

21 Selim Deringil (2003), in his article compares the Ottoman attitudes towards its periphery lands with the western power's colonial policy and he comes up the concept of "borrowed colonialism". He basically argues that the centralization or westernization policy of the Empire was more acceptable before Tanzimat era yet, due to the severe conditions against western powers, the harshness and speed of centralization were accelerated. He used the case of Tunisia where the authorities tried to convince the Bedouins to settle but still I think it might be valid for the case of Kurds as well, especially before the reign of the CUP.

(one of the strongest families in Botan region). The main reason why Bedirhan Bey revolted against the Ottomans was due to the implications of the centralization policies, specifically, the re-formation of territories which were under the authority of Bedirhan Bey; the attachment of Cizre to the Mosul governorate but his Centre remained in Diyarbakir province. Missionary reports²² and a letter from Vecihi Pasha, the governor of Diyarbakir to Bedirhan Bey, reveal that there was no nationalist conscience in his revolt (Özoğlu, 2004). Bedirhan's only aim was to prevent the division of his emirate. This can also be understood from his previous loyalty to the Centre as he had granted the title of musselim, was responsible for collecting taxes and also assisted the governor in stabilizing the region (Kardam, 2011, p.82). For these reasons, he was a respected and well-known tribal leader and when his revolt was suppressed by the Ottoman forces, he was sent to Istanbul, given salary and then sent into exile but not sentenced to death.

As a foundation to help control the region, he firstly established a small rifle and ammunition factory which provided the provisions required for his armed forces quickly and easily. Then when the Nestorians refused to pay their taxes to Bedirhan²³, he marched on them, killing many of them²⁴. This action concerned the Ottomans because the Centre did not want some powerful governor or an emirate to give the Christian foreign powers a reason to become involved in the Empire's internal affairs²⁵ (Zeki, 2010). The Ottomans, initially warned Bedirhan

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- 22 Both Özoğlu and Jwaideh quoted from American missionary report penned by Dr Austin Wright and Mr. Edward Breath who were in Persia and paid a visit to Bedirhan Bey. Accordint to this report, Bedirhan said that *“eight years ago, when he was weak and Turkey strong , he entered into an engagement eith the latter; and that now, though the power had changed hands, he did violate his word... Eight years ago he was poor, without power, and little known. The Turkish government then took by the hand; and now his wealth is uncalculable.”* (Dr. Austin H. Wright and Edward Breath, Missonary herald, 42,no.11 (Nov.1846), p.381). Bedirhan Bey did not assit to Mir Muhammad of Rewanduz in his revolt against the Ottomans who were also hardly dealing with the Ibrahim Pasha`s army coming from Egytp. This sort of agreement seems to be quite reasonable for both sides. Because between these main revolts there were plenty of struggle among petty emirates, asirets and non-muslim communities (yezidies and Natorians).
- 23 By based on the J. Joseph`s book, namely The Nestorians and their Muslim Neighbours (1961), Kemal Burkay argues that the reason why Bedirhan Bey attacked on Nestorians is not rejection of tax payments but missionary activities which convinced them that foreign powers would be defender against any attacks (Burkay, 1992, pp. 360-361)
- 24 Some authors considered the attack of Bedirhan Bey over Nestorians as a massacre and claimed the reason to be various from religious concern on missionary activities to inter-tribal power struggle over Nestorians (Jwaideh, 2006, pp. 66-72).
- 25 Despite the fact that the Ottoman forces defeated this emirate, waiting until the killings of Nestorians by Bedirhan Bey seems to be a bit sophisticated. As it is mentioned above,

and then later sent Hafiz Pasha to suppress the Botan emirate. Bedirhan Bey repulsed the Ottoman forces and this achievement encouraged him to announce his independence in 1847. Following this he minted coins in his own name and had his name read in Cuma (Friday) prayers as an explicit indication of his independence. In the meantime, he also extended his authority towards the north up to Van and south until Mosul, forming a confederation Centred in the Emirate of Botan (Kardam, 2011, p.253). Such steps made a military intervention inevitable against Bedirhan`s confederation (Jwaideh, 2006). With assistance promised by England and France, due to the killing of the Nestorians, the Ottoman government prepared a massive army, much greater than their first force with many heavily armed forces. Before the armies fought, Izzeddin Ser, the nephew of Bedirhan who was also the commander of some of Bedirhan`s troops defending the West side of the Botan, defected and joined the Ottoman army bringing his soldiers with him. This change paved the way for the invasion of Cizre, the Centre of Bedirhan Bey`s forces and led to the defeat of Bedirhan`s forces by the Ottomans.

After the failure of the Bedirhan revolts, the last powerful emirate in Kurdistan was destroyed. There were no powerful emirates remaining which could shake the Ottoman authority²⁶. Indeed, most of the Bedirhan family members were sent and forced to reside in Istanbul. Bedirhan Bey was then sent to Crete where he stayed for ten years. He was there rewarded with the title of `pasha` because of his assistance in solving a disturbance between Muslims and Christians in 1858. His next station was Damascus, Syria where he died in 1869-70 (Özoğlu, 2004). Again, while the revolt may not have been conducted with nationalist sentiments

centralization policy of the Ottomans had already started for several decades. Yet, the Ottomans did not object to this emirate as soon as they defeated *Mir* Muhammad of Rewanduz revolt. It is highly likely because of that the Ottomans knew that Kurdish region was not easy to control and the government was lack of fiscal and human resources to fasten and fortify the centralization policy. Furthermore, the government had to deal with the Muhammad Ali Pasha revolt whose menace arrived at the place which was adjacent to Istanbul, the Capital. Moreover, nationalistic sentiments rose among Christian subjects in the Balkans and significant resentments which could have triggered nationalism in Arab provinces reached at alarming level. When economic and diplomatic constraints by the European powers were added to the hard conditions in which the Ottoman government had to dealing with, trying to eliminate a local power providing order and control in Kurdish region may not be considered as a preferable option. However, when Bedirhan Bey extended his control almost all over the Kurdish region and his attack on Nestorians, which caused a strong foreign pressure, it became an obligatory mission for the Ottoman government to sweep Bedirhan Bey`s revolt away in terms of both internal and external affairs.

26 Bedirhan Bey`s adherents as they supported him easily defeated one by one in 1849: Khan Mahmud, Nurullah Bey of Hakkâri, Şerif Bey of Bitlis. Also, Izzeddin Ser ruled the Botan Emirate for a decade after Bedirhan Bey, he revolted against the Centre (Jwaideh, 2006; Zeki, 2010).

those who were descendants of Bedirhan Bey would become strong advocates of the Kurdish nationalist movements in the late Ottoman Empire both in the capital and in Europe.

In regards to the nationalist features of the Bedirhan revolt, first of all, it is again apparent that most of the revolt was in response to the centralization policies which sought to revoke the hereditary right to lead an emirate. Considering that emirates were at that point fully or semi-autonomous this would likely have caused a dramatic reduction in the wealth and reputation of the ruling families. Thus, it can be understood why until the 1860s one of the ruling family members seized the power at the end of the revolt. None of these rulers pursued a nationalist agenda. Indeed, if there had been any signs of nationalism from these leaders it is certain that they would now be part of the Kurdish nationalist narrative history but this is not the case. In addition, there is no adequate evidence illustrating any cultural, political, social or economic background which promoted Kurdish nationalist sentiments. On the other hand, it remains undeniable that there was a contradiction between the centralization policy of the Ottoman administration and the autonomous structure of Kurdish region which meant that conflict was inevitable. Ending with the quotation taken from Hatipoğlu's book²⁷ in which he made a quite meaningful conclusion in terms of nationalistic features of revolts during 19th century. He states that "...in the rough period of the Empire (the first half of 19th century), the degree of nationalism in the revolt of Mehmet Ali Pasha of Egypt is the same as nationalist degree of Kurdish tribal revolts" (Hatipoğlu, 1992, p. 45).

5. SULTAN ABDULHAMİD II AND ŞEYH UBEYDULLAH REVOLT

As a result of the strict centralization policy pursued by the Empire, most of the Kurdish tribal emirates in Kurdistan were purged. This created a power vacuum in the region which was subsequently filled by the leaders of religious orders²⁸.

27 Hatipoğlu, Ömer V. (1992) *Bir Başka Açıdan Kurt Sorunu*, Mesaj Yayınları: Ankara

28 The main function of tribal social and administration structure had been that they provide an intermediation between the Centre and local people. For instance, in the name of Ottoman government these leaders were collecting taxes and preparing troops and cavalries in case of need. Unfortunately, the Ottoman financial and human resources were not enough to meet the needs of centralization. As a result of that, provincial and local governors remained insufficient; moreover, incumbent governors were not paid enough to prevent them to go for bribery. In addition, there were still small Kurdish tribes, families and *aşirets* who ruined the order. Furthermore, inter-tribal struggle caused an uncontrollable social and economic disturbance in the region (McCarthy, 1997). This whole picture reflects what sort of power

The rise of sheikhs coincided with the ascendance of Sultan Abdulhamid II to the throne in 1876 when the Ottomans were once again defeated by Russia with considerable land and Christian subjects being lost (Shaw & Shaw, 1977 p.172). Therefore, the amount of Christian subjects in the Empire dramatically decreased and the Empire gained a more Islamic appearance. In the meantime, a constitution was promulgated, which restrained the power of sultan and empowered the Ottoman parliament. By propounding the war with Russia and failure of the government and the parliament, Sultan Abdulhamid II prorogued the parliament and the new constitution. From that point to 1908, most of the opposition groups²⁹ in the Empire saw the reestablishment of the constitution as an appropriate remedy to cure the “sick man” which was the Ottoman Empire. Throughout his reign, Sultan Abdulhamid II transferred the notion of Ottomanism³⁰ into Pan-Islamism³¹ (Kayali, 1997 p. 31). This ideological shift was probable following the continued loss of the Christian Balkan lands. By the 1880s, when Ottomanism could no longer keep the Christian Balkan population within the Ottoman territory, Abdulhamid II placed an emphasis on Islam and his unused title of the caliph to assert religious authority over Muslims across the world. As a result of this decision, Islamic symbols and religious sentiments gained much greater importance in politics and society (Derinçil, 1991; Davison, 1988 p.111). This is also one of the reasons why the sheikhs in Kurdistan obtained considerable social and political power.

vacuum was fulfilled by sheiks whose significance dramatically increased in the following years after the demise of powerful Behdinan, Soran, Hakkari and Botan tribes in the first half of the 19th century. Religious sentiment among Kurdish people was already strong but they also involved into political affairs of Kurdish people. This condition endured until that the Kemalist government of the new Turkish republic launched a fierce opposition against both Kurdish nationalism and Islamic appearance of the republic as the main successor state of the Empire. Therefore, between the mid-1850s to the end of the first quarter of the 20th century, religion prevailed in political conditions of Kurdish people.

- 29 The most influential opposition group, the CUP (Tunaya, 1984) reached at its aim as its members operated a coup d'état against Abdulhamid II and they succeeded in 1908 when parliamentary system revitalized after 30 years break.
- 30 Ottomanism was a prominent ideology endorsed by Tanzimat bureaucrats who claimed that being Ottoman for all components of the Empire was only way to keep the Empire together. Neither religion nor ethnic origin changed the reality of being Ottoman.
- 31 Pan-Islamism can be considered as an ideology which calling Muslim going back to their fundamental Islamic values and rules. In this idea, only religion was seen as a solution for separatist and nationalist disengagement. All Muslim population (Turks, Kurds, Arabs and Albanians) should be living together in the Empire. Kayali defines Islamism as “*Ottomanism equipped with ideological embellishment deriving from Islam.*” (Kayali, 1997, p. 31) since the aim of both approaches was to keep the empire together and protect it from dissolution.

Until the end of the Kurdish emirate, the function of the Sheikhs, especially the Şemdinan family was to serve as a spiritual advisor. Yet, since the emirates had been eliminated from the realm of Kurdish politics, the main actors who could assert influence on the social, economic and political structure of the region was the sheikhs (Özoğlu, 2004). Sheikh Ubeydullah gained control of substantial political and military power by increasing his followers in both the Ottoman and Persian sides.

The conflict between Persia and Şeyh Ubeydullah commenced when the Persian government demanded taxes from the Kurdish tribes in its territory in 1872 and the Kurdish people rejected to pay taxes instead paying them to Şeyh Ubeydullah. Seyh Ubeydullah had demanded that his his authority over the Kurdish tribes be recognised by the Persian authorities but his demand was rejected. In regards to relations with the Ottomans, Şeyh Ubeydullah sent a small troop to support the Ottoman army against Russia in the 1877-78 war. As a result of this war, many Kurdish people in the region were exposed to death and famine. What was worse was that at the end of the war, the Ottoman soldiers terrorized the region as they had not been sufficiently paid due to the fiscal deficiency of the Empire. As Olson describes:

“The war had brought devastation, famine, and general hardship accompanied by disease, banditry, and violence. The people of the eastern provinces of the Empire were in desperate straits.” (Olson, 1989, p. 5)

This condition caused a massive disturbance amongst Kurdish people who did not have any alternative apart from seeking protection from Şeyh Ubeydullah, the well-known, respected and wealthy religious leader. By sending an ambassador to Istanbul, he sought compensation for the damages caused by the Ottoman soldiers. After he failed to receive any positive responses for his demand, he prepared to revolt against both sides³² (Nezan, 1993).

To this end he gathered 220 tribal leaders in Şemdinan to create a blueprint for revolt and then launched a war against Persia successfully arriving adjacent to Tabriz, the capital of Persia. The Persian government directly warned the Ottomans, as this revolt could place them in danger too and requested assistance from Russia. The Ottomans at the beginning were not eager to become involved with the revolt and so neither sought to prevent it nor provided support for it. On the

32 As requirements of such a preparation, he contacted with the Khidive of Egypt, the Sherif of Mecca as well as foreign powers representatives, such as Russian and British counsellors in Van and Erzurum provinces (Nezan, 1993).

one hand, the Russians diplomatically attempted to pressure the Ottoman government into doing something; but on the other hand the British were pressuring the government into not taking action as the British and Russians were in a struggle over Iran (Kazemzadeh, 1968). When the revolt gained strength and commenced to threaten the Ottoman government, as Şeyh Ubeydullah was eager to extend his revolt into Ottoman territory, the Ottoman government grew concerned over the potential threat it represented and sent troops to attack Şeyh. As such, Seyh remained contained within a narrow triangle involving the Ottomans, Persians and Russians and at the end of the revolt, he capitulated to the Ottomans and was sent to Istanbul. He eventually escaped from Istanbul to his home town, Şemdinan and attempted to organize another revolt but his efforts failed and he was sent into exile, Hejaz (Goktas, 1991).

The revolt of Şeyh Ubeydullah was the last significant revolt against the Ottoman Empire. There are several features which distinguish this revolt from the previous tribal revolts. First of all, it was a trans-tribal revolt which had an impact on both the Persian and the Ottoman Empires (Olson, 1989). This revolt was also more complicated than tribal revolts because of the significant influence and involvement of international politics. Lastly, it is regarded as the most nationalist revolt among all of the revolts which took place in the 19th century. The reference to nationalism as an important element of this revolt can also not be easily dismissed as the rebellion was not about preserving tribal or personal interests. As such the question of whether it was or was not a nationalist revolt looms large.

Several distinct responses have been provided to this crucial question. From the western point of view, of Jwaideh, Olson and McDowall and from Kurdish nationalist perspective of Burkay, Göktaş and Emin Zeki, Naci Kutlay (Kutlay, 2012, p.99), the Şeyh Ubeydullah rebellion was a nationalist rebellion against both the Ottomans and the Persians. Their argument draws mainly from the correspondence between the Şeyh and general-consular of Britain in Van and Erzurum and between these counsellors and their home country. However, what these authors did not mention is that all these correspondence coincided with the announcement of the Berlin Treaty between the Ottomans and foreign powers. A striking element of which was article 61, which says that the Ottomans should spent effort to make “improvements and reforms demanded by local requirements in the provinces inhabited by the Armenians, and to guarantee their security against the Circassians and Kurds.”³³ This article was considered as a promulgation of the

33 The quotation is taken from the Olson’s book, the Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880-1925, p.5.

Armenian state whose borders overlapped with the Kurdish territory, which was in that time under the authority of Şeyh Ubeydullah. His response to this intention of foreign powers could lead him to the establishment of autonomous or fully independent Kurdish state. His view can be understood by considering his own words, contained in a letter sent from the Şeyh to Tosun Pasha, the mutasarrıf of Başkale, a subdivision of Van province. In this letter he stated:

“what is this I hear, that the Armenians are going to have an independent state in Van, and that the Nestorians are going to hoist the British flag and declare themselves British subjects? I will never permit it, even if I have to arm the women.”³⁴

Based on this quotation, Jwaideh argues that this was the most significant reason behind the Şeyh's revolt. This argument was also advocated by Olson and McDowall but while I partly agree with this interpretation I contend that the fundamental aim was not the formation of an independent Kurdish state but rather an autonomous Kurdish federation, as a reaction to the possibility of the establishment of an Armenian state in the region. By calling 220 Kurdish tribal leaders together under his leadership and initially attacking Persian territory, he revealed his intention to hold status under the suzerainty of the Ottomans.

On the other hand, there is another letter sent from the Şeyh to Mr. Corchran, an American missionary in Şeyh's region, which is often used as backbone for arguments which present Şeyh's absolute nationalist aims. In this letter he stated that:

“The Kurdish nation, consisting of more than 500,000 families, is a people apart. Their religion is different and their laws and customs distinct. They are known among all nations as mischievous and corrupt... The chiefs and rulers of Kurdistan, whether Turkish or Persian subjects, and the inhabitants of Kurdistan (the Christians) one and all are united and agreed that matters cannot be carried on this way with the two governments, and necessarily something must be done so that the European governments having understood the matter shall enquire into our state... We want our affairs to be in our hands... Otherwise the whole of Kurdistan will take the matter into their own hands, as they are unable to put up with these continued evil deeds, and the oppression which they suffer at the hands of the two governments (the Ottomans and the Persians) of impure intentions.”³⁵

34 This quotation was given place by Olson (p.5), Jwaideh and Özoğlu in their works to indicate the Şeyh's strong opposition to the establishment of Armenian state.

35 The quotation is taken from the Özoğlu's book: (Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries*, 2004)

This statement should be considered along with the previous quotation reflecting the response of the Şeyh to the possible establishment of an Armenian state in the Kurdish region in 1878 and in order to gain a better understanding of the actual aims of Şeyh Ubeydullah.

It is generally accepted by the researchers of Kurdish nationalism that the Ottoman government at the beginning of 1870s assisted Şeyh in placing the social, economic and political conditions in order. By doing so, there were mutual benefits for both the Şeyh and the Ottoman government, which was directly ruled by the prominent supporter of Pan-Islamism, Sultan Abdulhamid II³⁶. The weakness of the Ottoman Empire compared to the foreign powers, in order to prevent the implementation of article 61 of the Berlin Treaty disturbed this mutual benefit. His reaction against the will of the foreign powers reflected itself by emphasizing the distinguishing features of the Kurdish nations in comparison with the Armenian nations. What he was emphasising in the second quotation was probably that Kurdish people were in the majority in the region (by mentioning number of families) and Muslim (by mentioning the difference in religion). In order to establish order in the region then it stands to reason that the authority of the region should be provided to the Kurdish people from whom the most suitable candidate as a leader was the Şeyh himself (Jwaideh, 2006).

Further correspondence between British counsellors also indicated that the Şeyh had already consent to accept Ottoman suzerainty but only as an autonomous Kurdish state. Illustrating this intention, Özoğlu (2004) quotes from the letter of Major Henry Trotter, the British consul-general in Erzurum, who stated that:

“I believe the Sheikh to be more or less personally loyal to the Sultan; and he would be ready to submit to his authority and pay him tribute as long as he could get rid of the Ottoman officials, and be looked at delege (representative) as well as de facto as the ruling Chief of Kurdistan” (Özoğlu, 2004, p. 76).

Another letter provided by Özoğlu (2004) leads us towards the same conclusion. This one, written by Emilius Clayton, the vice-consul of Van to Henry Trotter and stated that:

“The Sheikh was going to send his son to Constantinople with the following proposal. He will point out the large sum paid to the Sultan by Bedirhan Bey, when semi-independent, and will offer to pay a still larger sum if his authority over Kurdistan is recognized, and his rule is not interfered with.”

36 In his term, most of the Sheikh had direct connection with the Sultan. Because of that, the influence of a sheikh sometimes outweighed the influence of provincial governors.

Therefore, to claim that the revolt was an entirely nationalist revolt aimed at achieving separation from the Ottoman Empire does not seem correct. Rather, this revolt's nationalist dimension largely stemmed from the will of the foreign powers who desired to make the conditions of Armenians and Nestorians better by forcing the Ottomans to implement reforms. Another reason, which should not be neglected, is that under both the Ottomans and the Persians; Kurdish people were suffering due to corrupt officials, banditry and devastating famines as well as the heavy taxes imposed by both empires. Moreover, it should be recognised that the revolt did ignite the fire of nationalism among Kurdish people as it made the Kurdish question become an international issue which was not resolved. Furthermore, it provided the direct intervention of foreign powers into regional politics, which brought with it ideals of nationalism (Kent, 1996).

6. CONCLUSION

From the perspective of Kurdish nationalism, the 19th century is considered as a century of war as the Kurdish region during this period experienced minor and major revolts almost every decade. It would be wrong to assert that these confrontations did not contribute to the history of Kurdish nationalism not only in Turkey but also in several other Ottoman successor states. However, none of these rebellions had a direct nationalist character. In the beginning, generally speaking the revolts experienced were all due to tribal interests but when the Armenian question came to the fore the Kurdish and Muslim identities came into prominence. This is why Şeyh Ubeydullah emphasized the essential features of the Kurdish people, in other words it was largely in response to the consideration being provided to the Armenian people as a distinct nation. Another historical lesson extracted from these revolts is that religious leaders became as prominent representatives of the Kurdish people as tribal leaders previously were. From the dawn of the 20th century until the suppression of all religious institution and symbols in the modern Turkish republic by its founders, Muslim identity preserved its prominence among Kurdish people. This is not only because of the Pan-Islamist policy of Abdulhamid II and the elimination of powerful Kurdish tribes but also due to the religious discourses of Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic throughout the independence struggles against the foreign powers (McDowall, 2007; Kirişçi & Winrow, 1997).

From the Ottoman perspective, it is clear that most of the reforms that occurred during the 19th century were intended in order to help the Empire survive and retain its multi-ethnic and multi-religious social, economic, cultural and political structure. That is to say, until the inception of Young Turks era with the

1908 revolution, efforts to keep the Empire integrated were all made with the conscience of the Ottoman Empire preserving its traditional structure with additional reforms. The harsh experience of the separation of the nations in the Balkan from the Empire inevitably had a significant influence upon the other co-religious but ethnically distinct nations. This is why as soon as the Young Turks who had accommodated Arabs (Anderson, Muslih, Simon, and Khalidi, 1991), Kurds, Albanians and Turks (Kushner, 1977) in one 'pot' took over the administration of the Empire, these ethnic consciences directed their dynamism into secessionist activities which could be seen clearly in the Albanian and Arab nationalist movements. In short, the 19th century was a century of radical transformation from the strictly established traditional state structure to a more modern one. During the century, all efforts had as their focus the goal of keeping the Empire alive. That is why the reformers of this century were referred to as "Young Ottomans" and only later, at the end of the 19th century, were prominent reformers then referred to as "Young Turks" (Arai, 1992).

Furthermore, the demise of the Kurdish emirates did not conceal the presence of tribes in both Ottoman and modern Turkish politics. For instance, in the late Ottoman period, most of the children or prominent member of these tribes joined Kurdish nationalist groups³⁷ or were involved with Kurdish cultural activities in the capital and across Europe. The modernization process experienced in the Empire might not have affected all Kurdish people but the children of the tribal leaders were granted access to many modern concepts and institution. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the reformed Ottoman administrations in general and specifically, Bedirhan Bey, sent a large amount of students, including some of his sons and relatives to Europe for education. In addition, modern education institutions, for instance, the Aşiret Mektebi, which was established by Abdulhamid II and the military school for training of members of Hamidiye Alayları, were attended by these junior Kurdish princes (Rogan, 1996; Mango 1999; Akpınar, 1997).

Modernization and secularization (which can generally be referred to as westernization) produced positivist and materialist ruling elites who were educated in modern schools in Istanbul and foreign capitals and this process also produced

37 For instance, Emin Ali Bedirhan and Şeyh Abdulkadir established Kürt Teavün and Teali Cemiyeti. Preceding that, a newspaper in Kurdish Language, the first time, was published in Cairo, Kurdistan, by member of Bedirhan Family.

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small but influential Kurdish elites who in turn planted nationalist seeds amongst the Kurdish people. Generally speaking, all of the efforts to improve the Empire through centralization and economic and social reforms had a significant impact on the Kurdish people. What differentiates the Kurdish elites from Turkish and Arab elites was simply the amount of people who closely interacted with the modernisation process. Specifically, the Bedirhan, the Cemilpaşazade and the Nakşibendi Şemdinan, the Şeyh Arvasi and the Hanizade families, as well as several religious leaders, such as Şeyh Said and Bediuzzaman Said-i Kurdi come to mind. Each member of these families was involved in building of national conscience among Kurdish people (Özoğlu, 2001). In summary, I would like to say that the revolts of the 19th century were primarily due to reactions against centralization policies and were not driven by explicitly nationalist ideas. Yet, the roots of Kurdish nationalism can be recognised in the Young Turks era during the first quarter of the 20th century rather than in the 19th century revolts.

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