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Şeref Xan's *Sharafnama*:[1] Kurdish Ethno-Politics in the Early Modern World, Its Meaning and Its Legacy

This paper critically analyzes the Sharafnama*, a history of the Kurds, written by the late sixteenth century ruler of Bitlis, Şeref Xan. Given the politically sensitive nature of the Middle East's "Kurdish Question," the* Sharafnama *has become an extremely important resource through which Kurdish nationalists have sought to construct a coherent "national narrative." This is due to the fact that Şeref Xan's book constitutes one of the few systematic histories of the Kurds written before the twentieth century. This paper moves away from nationalist inspired interpretations of the* Sharafnama*, which see the work as a "national(ist)" history. Instead, it posits that, although the piece can be regarded as a manifestation of Kurdish "ethno-politics," it is necessary to look at it within the context of the relationship between the Kurdish tribal princes who ruled large areas of "Kurdistan," on one hand, and the Ottoman and Safavid empires who competed for control of this region, on the other. In particular, it brings to the fore an often forgotten and/or ignored aspect of Şeref Xan's history, namely its pro-Ottoman bias. In this way, the article makes broader points relating to the nature of the Kurdish identity in the early modern period, and the influence of such conceptions on the later construction of the modern Kurdish identity.*

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[1] Transcription and transliteration of words and names is a tricky business, especially in the field of Kurdish studies, in which the utilization of sources in a number of different Arabic-script based languages is necessary. I have opted, therefore, to use the Latinized Kurdish Alphabet for the names of Kurds. Thus, instead of the Persian "Sharaf Khan" or the Turkish "Şerefhan," I have opted for the Kurdish "Şeref Xan." However, as Şeref Xan's history was written in Persian, I have transliterated it according to the scheme forwarded by *Iranian Studies* as "Sharafnama." Other Persian names and terms have been dealt with in a similar fashion. Similarly, (Ottoman) Turkish names and terms follow their modern Turkish spelling. Needless to say, there are issues with my somewhat idiosyncratic decision as it might be seen as "imposing" a "nationality" on individuals who may not have seen themselves in such a light. This is not my intension. In the preparation of this paper, citations are from the Mehmet Emin Bozarslan Turkish translation of the *Sharafnama*, first published in 1971. Şerefhan Bitlisi, *Şerefname Kürd Tarihi (Birinci Bölümü)*, trans. M. Emin Bozarslan (Istanbul: Deng, 2006). However, I have also consulted M.R. Izady's 2005 partial English–Persian edition, Prince Sharaf al-Din Bitlisi, *The Sharafnama or the History of the Kurdish Nation*, trans. M.R. Izady (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2005), as well as François Bernard-Charmoy's three-volume French–Persian edition, Chèrefou'ddîne, *Chèref-nameh, ou, Fastes de la nation kourde*, trans. François Bernard-Charmoy (St.-Petersburg: Commissionnaires de l'Académie Impériale des sciences, 1870). I would specifically like to thank Monsieur Boris James of Paris for bring to my attention some extremely important Arabic sources and for his valuable feedback on this paper.

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Kurdish nationalists tend to regard their "nation" as a primordial category, possessed of an ineffable cultural essence, binding a host of different peoples living a variety of historical periods to a single overarching trans-historic identity stretching back into the mists of time. Of course, the idea that nations are the primary categories of human civilization and consequently the primary modes of both political organization and historical analysis is not a misconception limited to Kurdish patriots and their supporters. In modern times the principle that loyalty to the nation should trump all other forms of social solidarity and that the nation-state is the *natural* unit of political organization have come to be widely accepted. Yet, despite the persistence of this "primordialist" vision of nations amongst both the masses and political elites, much scholarship has shown that, far from being eternal, the nation is a peculiarly modern form of identity.[2] Influenced by such "modernist" theories of ethnicity and nationalism, many of the more recent academic works on Kurds and Kurdish nationalism have sought to demonstrate that the concept of a "Kurdish nation" and the ideology of "Kurdish nationalism" (i.e. the demand for a Kurdish nation-state)[3] is a product of processes which occurred over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[4]

Nevertheless, despite the hegemony of modernism in the study of ethnicity and nationalism, some theoreticians have endeavored to find a middle way between "primordialist" and "modernist" approaches. These scholars have highlighted the existence of pre-modern forms of ethnic sentiment and, furthermore, sought to demonstrate the influence of these pre-modern ethnic communities (*ethnie*) upon the construction of modern nations.[5] It is within the context of these theoretical

[2] For examples of "modernist" scholarship on nationalism see for example Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991); Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Granger (London: Canto, 1992), 1–14; Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[3] This understanding of the term Kurdish nationalism is based largely on Ernest Gellner's well-known definition of nationalism as "primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent..." see Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 1.

[4] For some of the most recent modernist inspired literature see Martin Strohmeier, *Crucial Images in the Presentation of a Kurdish National Identity* (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Hakan Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004); Süleyman Azad Aslan, "The Clash of Agencies: The Formation and Failure of Kurdish Nationalism 1918–1922" (PhD diss., Royal Holloway and Bedford Collage, 2007); Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2005); Hamit Bozarslan, "Some Remarks on Kurdish Historiographical Discourse in Turkey," in *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism*, ed. Abbas Vali (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2003), 14–39; Abbas Vali, "Genealogies of the Kurds: Constructions of Nation and National Identity in Kurdish Historical Writing," in *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism*, ed. Abbas Vali (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2003), 58–105; Michael Gunter, "The Modern Origins of Kurdish Nationalism," in *The Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism*, ed. Mohammed M.A. Ahmed and Michael Gunter (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2007), 1–17.

[5] See for example Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986); Anthony D. Smith, "Gastronomy or Geology? The Role of Nationalism in the Reconstruction of

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debates that this article assesses the nature of the Kurdish ethnic sentiment in the early modern period through an examination of the *Sharafnama* (The Book of Honor), a history of the Kurds, written in Persian and authored by the late sixteenth century prince of Bitlis,[6] Şerefeddînê Bitlisî, better known to posterity as Şeref Xan.

Şeref Xan and Kurdish Nationalism: The Politicization of the Sharafnama

Kurdish nationalists have long regarded *Sharafnama* as evidence of the Kurdish national spirit as well as an expression of the Kurdish nation's desire to determine its own destiny. As such, the work's author, Şeref Xan, has been incorporated into the pantheon of Kurdish patriotic heroes. In Hewler (Arbil), the capital of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq, a cultural center has been named in honor of Bitlis' sixteenth century ruler. Similarly, in Turkey, at the *Mezopotamya Kültür Merkezi* (Mesopotamia Cultural Center), a Kurdish association based in Istanbul's Beyoğlu district, the *Sharafnama*, in a modern Kurdish translation, is sold alongside the works of the jailed Kurdish nationalist leader Abdullah Öcalan.[7]

Şeref Xan's conspicuous presence in the cannon of Kurdish nationalism is perhaps understandable given that the *Sharafnama* is one of the few texts produced prior to the nineteenth century specifically focusing on the history of the Kurds in a systematic manner. As modern concepts of nation and community gained currency in the minds of Kurdish intellectuals, *Sharafnama* became an essential historical resource for the pioneers of the Kurdish "enlightenment" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. On a basic level, as a history detailing not only the origins of the Kurdish people, but also the trials and tribulations of various "Kurdish" princely houses, *Sharafnama* allowed Kurdish historians to construct a national narrative. Indeed, Şeref Xan, who completed his masterpiece towards the end of the sixteenth century, was writing during a period in which Kurdish princes, albeit as vassals of the Ottoman and Iranian empires, held sway over large parts of Eastern Anatolia, a period which many later Kurdish thinkers would regard as a "golden age."[8]

In addition, the fact that Kurdish "ethno-history" is relatively underdeveloped and poorly documented, when compared to those of the neighboring Arabs, Persians, Turks and Armenians, has meant that Şeref Xan's oeuvre has assumed even greater centrality to Kurdish nationalist writing than it might otherwise have had it been part of a much larger genre of pre-nineteenth century "Kurdish" historical writing.

Nations," *Nations and Nationalism* 1, no. 1 (1995): 3–23; John Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); John Hutchinson, "Myth against Myth: The Nation as Ethnic Overlay," *Nations and Nationalism* 10, no. 1–2 (2004): 109–24; John Hutchinson, *Nations as Zones of Conflict* (London: SAGE Publications, 2005).

[6] I use here the term "prince" which covers a number of titles used to describe the rulers of the Kurdish tribal principalities of Eastern Anatolia, such as Bey/Beg, Khan/Han/Xan and Mîr/Emir.

[7] The modern Kurdish translation is published by the Istanbul-based *Avesta* publishing house. Şerefxanê Bedlîsî, *Şerefname*, trans. Ziya Avci and Azad Aktürk (Istanbul: Avesta, 2007).

[8] See for example the poem "*Hakim û Mîrekanî Kurdistan*" [The rulers and princes of Kurdistan], in Hacî Qadirê Koyî, *Dîwan Hacî Qadirê Koyî 1815–1897* (Stockholm: Nefel, 2004), 124–5. Koyî, as one of the pioneers of the Kurdish "ethnic revival," idealized the autonomy of the Kurdish principalities. "*Hakim û Mîrekanî Kurdistan*" bemoans the destruction of the Kurdish principalities, which occurred during the mid-nineteenth century, and presents an idealized image of Kurdish self-rule.

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As Anthony D. Smith has noted, the *unevenness* of "ethno-history"—i.e. the relative richness or poverty of *particular* "ethno-histories"—has often itself been a source of "national competition and conflict, as the less well endowed communities seek to attain cultural parity with the better endowed."[9] Thus the *Sharafnama*'s status as one the only major Kurdish historical text dating from before the nineteenth century prompted veteran political activist Dr. Ebdullah Cewdet (Dr. Abdullah Cevdet), in a 1913 article published by an Istanbul-based Kurdish students' journal, to write that "with one 'Book of Honor' a nation's honor of history or history of honor cannot be saved and protected."[10] Mihemed Emîn Zekî Beg (Muhammed Emin Zeki Bey), a former Ottoman officer and military historian of Kurdish origin as well as one-time Iraqi minister, made a similar point. In the introduction to the Arabic edition of his *Xulasayekî Tarîxî Kurd û Kurdistan* (An Overview of the History of the Kurds and Kurdistan), written in the 1930s, he boasted that his work was "the first book written on Kurdish history after the *Sharafnama*."[11]

In the post-Second World War era, the work has continued to be of great symbolic importance for the Kurdish movement. With the renaissance of Kurdish cultural activism in Turkey in the 1960s and 1970s, after decades of heavy state repression, *Sharafnama* once again re-emerged as a topic of controversy. In 1971, Mehmet Emin Bozarslan, an author and translator, published the first modern Turkish translation of the piece.[12] In response, the Turkish state, concerned about expressions of a separate Kurdish identity, took him to court. As part of the court case, the opinions of well-established Turkish academics and historians were solicited. The result was that in April 1971 an expert report was forwarded to the Istanbul public prosecutor. The authors noted that, although the book itself did not contravene current Turkish legislation, they felt that "*the purpose of the book's publisher*, which is to remind some ethnic groups living in our country of their historical past and to show them the way to establish an independent state, must be evaluated separately."[13]

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[9] Anthony D. Smith, *Myth and Memories of the Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 17.

[10] Ebdullah Cewdet, "Bir Hitab," *Roj-i Kurd*, 6 Haziran 1329 (June 19, 1913). Ebdullah Cewdet's statement works out as a play on words in Turkish: "Bir *Şerefnâme* ile bir millet şeref-i tarihisini ve yahud tarih-i şeref tasarruf ve muhafaza edemez." Ebdullah Cewdet was one of the founding members of the opposition to Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II (r. 1876–1909). He was a central figure in the development of the early "Young Turk" movement. However, he was of Kurdish origin and maintained strong links to the Kurdish movement prior to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. For greater detail on the relationship between Ebdullah Cewdet and Kurdish nationalism see Malmîsanij, *Kürt Milliyetçiliği ve Dr. Abdullah Cevdet* (Uppsala: Jina Nu, 1986).

[11] Muhammed Emin Zeki Beg, *Kürtler ve Kürdistan Tarihi*, trans. Vahdettin İnce, Mehmet Dağ, Reşat Adak and Şükrü Aslan (Istanbul: Nû Bihar, 2011), 22.

[12] Mehmet Emin Bozarslan translated several important historical works on Kurds into modern Turkish. For more on the career and intellectual development of Mehmet Emin Bozarslan see Metin Yüksel, "A 'Revolutionary' Kurdish Mullah from Turkey: Mehmed Emin Bozarslan and His Intellectual Evolution," *The Muslim World* 99, no. 2 (2009): 356–80.

[13] Sahir Erman, Yılmaz Altuğ and Duygun Yarsuvat, "İlk Bilirkişi Raporu" (Istanbul: Istanbul C. Savcılığı Basın Bürosuna, 1971) (emphasis added).

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The unfortunate result of this text's politicization and, moreover, its association with Kurdish nationalism has been that there has been a systematic failure to contextualize it. For instance, Amir Hassanpour, who penned one of the few academic studies of the Şeref Xan's writings in recent times, places the work within a narrative charting the development of a trans-historic sense of *Kurdiyetî* (Kurdishness/Kurdish nationalism) from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century.[14] Consequently, he both fails to adequately examine the broader political setting in which Şeref Xan was writing and to highlight an extremely important aspect of the *Sharafnama*, namely its pro-Ottoman sympathies. It is these failures which it is necessary to rectify if we are to gain a clearer picture of both the Şeref Xan's political mission in writing such a history and, more broadly, the Kurdish identity in the early modern period.

In a number of his writings on the Ottoman chronicles which detailed the foundation and development of the Ottoman polity, Colin Imber has noted that such works, often written decades and even centuries after the events they described, should be seen as reflecting the agendas of their authors and the political climate of the era in which they were written, rather than the historical reality of the early Ottoman period.[15] Such an approach to historical writing is extremely fruitful as it enables us to move away from anachronistic views which regard *Sharafnama* as both an expression of an objective historical reality and the first "national history" of the Kurds.[16]

Hence I hope to demonstrate that Şeref Xan's history was a political tract born within the context of imperial rivalries between the Ottoman and Safavid empires for control of the rugged highlands of Eastern Anatolia, North Western Iran and Upper Mesopotamia. More precisely, it will be argued that Şeref Xan was writing in defense of the system of autonomous Kurdish principalities which emerged in "Kurdistan"[17] over the course of the sixteenth century. And moreover, although not a Kurdish nationalist in a modern sense, in making his arguments, he mobilized

[14] See Amir Hassanpour, "Making the Kurdish Identity: Pre-20th Century Historical and Literary Discourses," in *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism*, ed. Abbas Vali (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2003), 106–62.

[15] Of particular importance are three articles discussing the myths surrounding the establishment of the Ottoman Empire. See Colin Imber, "Canon and Apocrypha in Early Ottoman History," in *Studies in Ottoman History in Honour of Professor V.L. Menage*, ed. Colin Heywood and Colin Imber (Istanbul: Isis Press, 1994), 117–37; Colin Imber, "Ideals and Legitimation in Early Ottoman History," in *Süleyman the Magnificent and His Age: The Ottoman Empire and the Early Modern World*, ed. Metin Kunt and Christiane Woodhead (London: Longman, 1995), 138–53; Colin Imber, "The Ottoman Dynastic Myth," *Turcica* no. XIX (1987): 7–27.

[16] For instance, M.R. Izady, who represents a particularly virulent strain of Kurdish nationalism, entitled his English translation of sections of the *Šaraf-nāma*: "The Sharafnâma: Or *the History of the Kurdish Nation*" (emphasis added).

[17] With regard to the zone of Kurdish settlement, Şeref Xan described "Kurdistan" as stretching "in a straight line from the Sea of Hürmüz [The Persian Gulf] to the provinces of Malatya and Maraş. In this way the line's northern side includes Fars, Iraq al-Ajami, Azerbaijan, Greater and Lesser Armenia. To the south it falls upon the provinces of Iraq al-Arab, Mosul and Diyarbakır." He points out, however, that "Together with this, many people and tribes from this race [the Kurds] have spread to many countries from east to west." Şerefhan, *Şerefname*, 20. Two points need to be made here: the term Kurdistan

a form of ethno-political discourse which helps us gain an insight into the nature of the Kurdish identity during the early modern period.

Şeref Xan, the Kurdish Princes and Ottoman–Safavid Rivalries: Contextualizing the Sharafnama

Before assessing the text of the *Sharafnama* directly, it is necessary to establish who Şeref Xan was and the broader geo-political context in which he wrote. It seems his celebrity in educated Ottoman circles was enough to merit a brief entry in the biographical dictionary of the seventeenth century Ottoman geographer Haci Halife Kâtib Çelebi. Under the heading *Sharafnama* we discover the following entry:

> The history of Sharaf Khan al-Bidlisi, known as Mîr Sharaf. The book is in Persian and gives an account of the Kurdish princes and rulers in chapters and then mentions the dynasties of the Ottomans and Safavids, in chronological order to the (Islamic) year 1005.[18]

Fortunately, the *Sharafnama* itself includes a large amount of biographical information relating to the author. Although hailing from the Rojkî tribe, the ruling house of Bitlis, Şeref Xan was born in 1543, in the city of Kararud located near the holy city of Qom in western Iran. His grandfather, Mîr Şeref, had been, at one time, a key supporter of the Ottomans in eastern Anatolia and, during the reign of Sultan Selim I (r. 1512–1520), had provided them with detailed intelligence reports on events taking place in Safavid territory.[19] However, during course of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent's (r. 1520–1566) "Campaign of the Two Iraqs" of 1533 to 1535, Mîr Şeref defected to the Safavids, and, as a result, was deposed by the Ottomans who awarded Bitlis to Olama Beg Takkalu.[20] Thus, Şeref Xan's

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does not imply a Kurdish demographic majority in these regions and "Kurdistan" was not the only zone of "Kurdish" political activity.

[18] Mustafa ibn Abdullah Katib Chalabi Haji Khalifa, "Sharafname," in *Kashf al-zunun*, ed. Gustav Fluegel (Lepizig, 1837).

[19] Jean-Louis Bacqué-Grammont and Chahryar Adle, "Quatre lettres de Šeref Beg de Bitlîs (1516–1520)," *Études turco-safavides* XI, Der Islam, 63 (1986): 90–116.

[20] According to Ottoman sources, Mîr Şeref revolted and was recognized as governor by the Safavids, after which Sultan Süleyman appointed Olama Beg Takkalu, the former Safavid governor of Azerbaijan, in his place. See Mehmed Solakzâde, *Tarih-i Solakzâde* (Istanbul: Mahmud Bey Matbaası, 1298 [1881–1882]), 483–4; and Peçevi İbrahim Efendi, *Peçevi Tarihi I*, trans. Bekir Sıtkı Baykal (Ankara: Kültür bakanlığı yayınları, 1981), 129. The *Sharafnama* presents a different version of events surrounding Mîr Şeref's defection. Şeref Xan claims that Mîr Şeref had no intention of deserting the Ottoman side. However, as a result of Olama Beg Takkalu's intrigues, as well as promises that if he were to be awarded the governorship of Bitlis he would be able to bring Azerbaijan into the Ottoman fold, Mîr Şeref was left with no other option but to seek sanctuary with the Safavids. Şerefhan, *Şerefname*, 319–33. According to an Iranian source, Olama Beg Takkalu, who had been *amir al-omara* of Azerbaijan, wished to become *vakil* (viceroy) and *mokhtar al-saltana* (executive of the affairs of state) in place of Chuha Soltan Takkalu. He therefore marched on the royal camp but was forced by Shah Tahmasp to flee to Van. Consequently, he "withdrew his allegiance from the Safavid house and ... departed for Istanbul." The same source makes no mention of Mîr Şeref's defection, merely noting that he, Şeref Xan Rojkî, "the Kurd, governor of Betlîs [Bitlis], was a vassal of the Safavid House" and later that he had been gov-

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father, Mîr Şamseddîn, spent most of his life in exile as a member of the Safavid court, before, at the age of 67, losing his mind through the pernicious influence of opium.

As a scion of the prestigious ruling house of the strategically important town of Bitlis, Şeref Xan was brought up under the protection of the Safavid Shah Tahmasb (r. 1524–1576) in the imperial household and educated alongside the Shah's own offspring. At the age of 12 he was given the rank of *amir* (commander/prince) of the Kurds, a position he held for three years. As a young man he served in the Safavid military, participating in the successful 1568 Gilan campaign against a local potentate, Khan Ahmad Khan, who had, on several occasions, rebelled against the Safavids.

After the ascension of Shah Isma'il II (r. 1576–1578), and at the age of 33, Şeref Xan was again honored and granted the title *amir al-omara al-akrad* (Supreme commander/prince of the Kurds), which according to the *Sharafnama*, meant that he was responsible at the royal court for representing all the princes and rulers of Kurdistan, Luristan and Guran as well as the Kurdish tribes. However, the high esteem in which the shah held Şeref Xan apparently aroused the jealousy of certain *Qezelbash* commanders,[21] who proceeded to conspire against him, accusing him of seeking to install Soltan Hosayn Mirza, Shah İsma'il's brother, as ruler of Iran. Subsequently, Şeref Xan was ordered to leave the capital and assume the governorship of Nakhchivan in the Caucasus.

Şeref Xan wrote that he regarded this turn of events as a fortuitous omen as it would afford him the opportunity to return to his homeland. After serving for a year and three months in Nakhchivan, thanks to the mediation of Hüsrev Pasha, the hawkish *beylerbeyi* (governor-general) of Van,[22] and the princes of Hakkâri and Mahmudî, he received a *berat* (imperial warrant) from Sultan Muard III (r. 1574–1595) appointing him to the governorship of Bitlis. And so, on 3 December 1578, he deserted his post and made for the Ottoman-held city of Van, thus terminating his career as a Safavid protégé. Once in Ottoman service Şeref Xan, spent the subsequent ten years campaigning against his former overlords in Shirvan, Georgia and Azerbaijan, for which he was compensated with an increase in his holdings to include the *nahiye* (sub-district) of Muş. Towards the end of his life, he retired to Bitlis, eventually handing over the reins of government to his son Şemseddîn. It was from there he composed his *Sharafnama*.[23]

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ernor of "Tonakābon in Gīlan": Eskandar Monshi, *History of Shah 'Abbas*, trans. Roger Savory (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1978), 1: 83, 110 and 227.

[21] *Qezelbash* refers to the predominantly, although not exclusively, Turkmen followers of Shah Isma'il (and the Safavids) who were named so for their distinctive red headgear.

[22] According to Peçevi, Hüsrev Pasha was a keen advocate of renewing hostilities with Iran. Peçevi, *Peçevi Tarihi II*, 32.

[23] For Şeref Xan's life and career see Şeref Xan's autobiographical notes in Şerefhan, *Şerefname*, 340–48; Chèrefou'ddîne, *Chèref-nameh*, vol. 1, part 2, 1–10. Also see Said Naficy, "Bidlīsī, Sharaf Al-Dīn Khān, Commonly Known as Sharaf Khān," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. P. Bearman et al. (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1993), 1208–09; Erika Glassen, "Bedlīsī, Šaraf-al-Dīn Khan," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1989), IV: 76–7; Ṣiddiq Būrahkah Ṣafizadah, *Tarīkh-i Kord*

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The privileged treatment that the Rojkî–Bitlisî dynasty received at the Safavid court is extremely interesting as it gives us a valuable insight into the tactics used in the Ottoman–Safavid conflict over the inaccessible Kurdish-inhabited borderlands. Neither empire was in a position to simply impose its will as it pleased in such regions. They were involved in a complex political balancing act and often made compromises with local Kurdish tribes and princes. According to one historian of the Ottoman military, the reasons for this are quite self-evident as Kurdish allies were essential and could tip the balance in favor of one side by providing (or withholding) logistical, transport and reconnaissance support.[24] Hence we should be attuned to the fact that Kurds were not simply passive elements within the broader conflicts between the Ottomans and the Safavids. They were active agents within regional politics and possessed of a certain amount of power to negotiate with the imperial states. Indeed, the *Sharafnama* might even be described as a literary express of this agency.

According to information supplied by the *Sharafnama*, as well as other Ottoman chronicles, the Ottomans' policy of *istimalet* (conciliation) towards the Kurdish princes proved decisive during the early years of the Ottoman–Safavid conflict.[25] When the Safavid Shah Isma'il (r. 1502–1524) succeeded the Akkoyunlu as ruler of Kurdistan in the early sixteenth century, he apparently removed many Kurdish princes from their tribal fiefs and replaced them with *Qezelbash* commanders. Those local leaders, such as the former Akkoyunlu governor of Diyarbakir, Emir Bey Musullu, who were lucky enough to become recipients of the shah's generosity, after rendering the appropriate submission, were removed from their positions and sent to distant provinces. In some instances even submission was not enough. The *Sharafnama* recounts an occasion when a number of Kurdish princes including Mîr Şeref of Bitlis (Şeref Xan's grandfather), Melik Xalîl of Hasankeyf, Boxtanî Şah Elî Bey of Cezire, Mîr Dawud of Hizan, Elî Beg of Sason along with eleven others, traveled to Isma'il's summer retreat of Khoy in order to pledge fidelity to the shah. However, when they arrived, the shah's commanders accused them of various crimes, upon which all but two were clamped in irons and imprisoned.[26]

Thus, when rivalries between the Ottomans and the Safavids came to a head during the latter days of Sultan Bayezid II's (r. 1481–1512) reign, the Ottomans were able to

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va Kordestan (Tehran: Nashr-i Atiyah, 1999), 21–2. It should be noted that most biographies on Şeref Xan's life and career are based on his autobiographical account given in the *Sharafnama*.

[24] Rhoads Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare 1500–1700* (Oxford: Routledge, 1999), 191.

[25] See for example Şerefhan, *Şerefname*, 313–21; Solakzâde, *Tarih-i Solakzâde*, 378–2; Celâl-zade Mustafa, *Selim-nâme*, trans. Ahmet Uğur and Mustafa Çuhadar (Ankara Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları, 1990), 169–71. For an overview of Selim's campaigns again Iran based on Ottoman sources see Selâhattin Tansel, *Yavuz Sultan Selim* (Ankara: Millî Eğitim Basimevi, 1969), 31–94; also see Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State* (London: Zed Books, 1992), 136–45; Hakan Özöğlu, "State–Tribe Relations: Kurdish Tribalism in the 16th and 17th Century Ottoman Empire," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 23, no. 1. (May 1996): 5–27; M. Mehdi İlhan, *Amid (Diyarbakır)* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 2000), 5–14. For a pro-Safavid take on events see Monshi, *History of Shah 'Abbas*, 1: 67–74; Also see the various accounts given in Vural Genç et al., *İranlı Tarihçilerin Kaleminden Çaldıran (1514)*, trans. Vural Genç (Istanbul: Bengi, 2011).

[26] Şerefhan, *Şerefname*, 315.

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take full advantage of the Kurdish princely elite's discontent. Central in this seems to have been the activities of İdris-i Bitlisi, an official in the service of the Ottoman court. İdris-i Bitlisi, a native of the city whose name he bore, was the son of a local Sufi scholar and was educated in his home town. As a young man he entered the Akkoyunlu scribal service, eventually rising to the position of *nişancı* (chancellor). After the collapse of the Akkoyunlu, Shah Isma'il invited him to entre Safavid service, an offer which İdris-i Bitlisi rejected. He subsequently left Tabriz and became a member of Bayezid II's royal household. In Istanbul İdris-i Bitlisi fell afoul of the factional politics rife in Bayezid's court. However, under Bayezid II's successor, Sultan Selim I, İdris-i Bitlisi returned to the center of power where his intimate knowledge of Kurdish affairs proved invaluable as the Ottoman sultan's attention was drawn eastward.[27]

According to the *Sharafnama*, even before Selim embarked on his campaigns in the east, İdris-i Bitlisi had secured the submission of some twenty Kurdish chiefs.[28] The sultan's faith in İdris-i Bitlisi's abilities was so great that he apparently gave him *carte blanche* to make whatever agreements he could in order to secure Kurdish support.[29] İdris toured widely in Kurdistan, making contact with many Kurdish leaders, including the princes of Ermi, Aşti, Soran, Sasun, Bitlis, İmadiye and Hasankeyf. "In total," according the seventeenth century historian Mehmed Hemdemî Çelebi Solakzâde, he "won the hearts of twenty five of the famed princes" and "with his sweet tongue" brought them to the side of the Ottomans.[30] İdris' efforts bore tangible results on the battlefield. The support of the Kurdish princes proved pivotal in the initial Ottoman campaigns against the Safavids in the early sixteenth century. Propagation on the part of İdris-i Bitlisi resulted in the Prince of Soran and the Prince of Cezire seizing Kirkuk and Mosul respectively in the name of the Ottomans. Kurdish forces further assisted Bıyıklı Mehmed Pasha during his campaigns in Diyarbakır and played a key role in both the capture of Mardin and the 1516 Ottoman victory at Koçhısar.

Ottoman sources also note the crucial role Kurds played in later campaigns. For instance, the seventeenth century *Nasihatname* (Mirror of Princes) of Aziz Efendi assigns the credit for the recapture of Van in 1548 to the role of Kurdish scouts. The same text claims that earlier, during Sultan Süleyman's 1535 retreat from Tabriz, the Kurdish princes had been a decisive factor in averting a military catastrophe. As the weather turned against Ottoman forces on their march back from Azerbaijan:

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[27] V.L. Ménage, "Bidlīsī, Idrīs," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. P. Bearman et al. (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1993), 1207–08; Cornell H. Fleischer, "Bedlīsī, Ḥakīm-al-Dīn Edrīs," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, IV: 75–6.

[28] Şerefhan, *Şerefname*, 319.

[29] For the *ferman* (edict) granting these powers to İdris-i Bitlisi see Zeki Beg, *Kürtler ve Kürdistan Tarihi*, 168–9, footnote 386.

[30] Solakzâde, *Tarih-i Solakzâde*, 378.

> The Kurdish commanders opened up the paths from the pastures of Sultaniyya in the direction of Baghdad, and guarding the troops of victory [i.e. the Ottomans] they arrived at the districts of Erdilan, Sûran, Derne and Derteng where they were met by Kurdish chiefs who came forth ... each bringing goods and provisions ... seeing to its [the Ottoman army] needs ... rode scout in the vanguard of the army leading it to Baghdad.[31]

The Ottoman historian Peçevi İbrahim Efendi also highlights the important part played by the Kurdish princes in Ottoman military operations against Iran during the sixteenth century. For instance, it is reported that in 1554 the Prince of İmadiye, Sultan Huseyîn Beg, launched a highly successful raid into Iranian territory in which he burned and looted the region around Tabriz.[32] Later, the same author describes how during the early stages of the Ottoman–Safavid war of 1576–1590, the prince of Mahmudî, Hesen Beg, thwarted the efforts of the Khan of Tabriz to seize the city of Van.[33]

Examples of the services that the Kurdish princes rendered to Ottoman forces over the course of the sixteenth century abound in chronicles and histories. The credit for the success of the Ottomans at winning over the Kurdish princes and so asserting primacy over Kurdistan can be, at least in part, ascribed to the special administrative regime which the empire enacted in the region thanks to the efforts of İdris-i Bitlisi. This policy has been aptly described as one of "unite and rule." On one hand, it recognized the autonomy of the Kurdish leaders and princes, ranging from the level of hereditary counties—*Ekrâd Sancak*s (Kurdish noble counties)—to (theoretically) tax exempt *Hükûmet*s (principalities). On the other hand, it endeavored to minimize instances of intra-Kurdish conflict.[34]

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[31] Aziz Efendi, *Kanûn-Nâme-i Sultânı li Aziz Efendi*, trans. Rhoads Murphey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Office of the University Publisher, 1985), 14.

[32] Peçevi, *Peçevi Tarihi I*, 223.

[33] Peçevi, *Peçevi Tarihi II*, 34.

[34] Hakan Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), 53. Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, 158–9. The broad outlines of this system of autonomy can be found in a *ferman* dating from the reign of Süleyman the Magnificent. "[Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent] gives the Kurdish princes who during the time of his father Selim the Grim fought the *Qezelbash*, and who at the moment serve the state with faith and who joined in the campaign of commander and chief Sultan İbrahim Pasha's against Iran with bravery. As a reward for their loyalty and courage and considering their petitions and requests, the provinces and citadels that have been ruled by them individually as their *yurtluk* and *ocaklık* since time immemorial along with those areas assigned to them under separate imperial licenses. Their provinces, citadels, cities, villages and pasture lands with all their products, under the condition of inheritance from father to son, are also given to them as their inheritable property. There should never be any external aggression and conflict amongst them. This great order will be obeyed and under no condition changed. In the case of the death of a prince, his province will be given, in its entirety, to his son, if there is only one. If there is more than one son, they [the sons] should divide up the lands by mutual agreement. If they do not come to any compromise, then whomever the princes of Kurdistan decide is the best choice shall succeed, and under the conditions of private ownership, he shall become the holder of the land in perpetuity. If the prince has no heir or relative then the land will not be

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From the perspective of many Ottoman officials the Kurds constituted a central component in the empire's eastern defenses. Koçi Bey, a seventeenth century reformist official, for instance, noted that the provinces of Diyarbakır and Van and the Kurdish principalities dependent on them (*ana tâbi Kürdistan*) could supply 50,000 soldiers and, moreover, that the combined forces of these provinces along with those supplied by the province of Erzurum were more than enough to combat the Iranians.[35] Indeed, during the seventeenth century, some Ottoman authors displayed great concern about the apparent weakening of the position of the Kurdish princes.[36] Peçevi complained that Kurdish princes of the caliber of those who had lived at the time of Selim I no longer existed.[37] Aziz Efendi decried the weakening of the Kurdish princes and laid the blame squarely upon the activities of greedy provincial governors.

> The provincial governors through their avarice dismissed a part of them [the Kurdish princes] from office while executing others without reason. Still others were forced to abandon their homelands and flee their places of residence out of fear of being dismissed or executed and their places were either given to the relatives of the provincial governors or other outsiders in contradiction to the terms of the treaty agreements.[38]

For Aziz Efendi such a state of affairs could not remain unresolved without the Ottoman's eastern defenses being severely compromised.

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given to an outsider. Through consultation with the princes of Kurdistan, the area shall be given to either princes or a member of the princes' family recommended by the princes of Kurdistan." Reproduced in Nazmı Sevgen, *Doğu ve Güneydoğu Anadolu'da Türk Beylikleri: Osmanlı Belgeleri ile Kürt Türkleri Tarihi* (Ankara: Türk Kültür Araştırma Enstitüsü, 1982), 42–3.The English translation is based largely on that by Özoğlu.

[35] Koçi Bey, *Koçi Bey risalesi: şimdiye elde edilememiş olan tarihî eserin tamamî*, trans. Ali Kemalî Aksüt (Istanbul: Vakıt Kütüphanesi, 1939), 26.

[36] It has been argued that the autonomy of the Kurdish princes was progressively reduced over the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. See Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State*, 57–9. For instance, in a document produced just after the Ottoman conquest of the region, the territories of the Kurdish princes were listed under a separate administrative heading—*Vilayet-i Kürdistan* (The Province of Kurdistan). This administrative division included the following Kurdish principalities, which were described using the term *Eyalet* (Territory): Bitlis, Soran, Çemişkezek, Cezire Hasankeyf, İmadiye Hakkâri (described as the "Great Princes of Kurdistan") and Sasun, Çapakçur, Sinar Ziddîk (Zirrîk?), Hizan, Palu, Eğil, Atak and Hîzzo. See TSA D. 5246 (1525) reproduced in Metin Kunt, *The Sultan's Servants: The Transformation of Ottoman Provincial Government, 1550–1650* (New York: Columbia University Press 1983), 109–16. If we compare this to the Ayn-i Ali Efendi's sixteenth century treatise, we see that the Kurdish principalities and "noble counties" are listed as parts of regular provinces. For example, the Province of Diyarbakir is described as consisting of eleven *Osmanlı Sancak*s (Ottoman/Regular Counties), eight *Ekrâd Beyi Sancak*s and five *Hükûmet*s. The same source recorded that the Province of Van consisted of thirteen *Sancak*s and one *Hükûmet*. See Ayn-ı Ali Efendi, *Kavânîn-i Âl-i Osman der Hülâsa-i Mezâmin-i Defter-i Dîvân* (Istanbul: Kalem Yayınları, 1979), 29 and 33. However, given the continued existence of powerful Kurdish principalities well into the nineteenth century, this reduction in autonomy should not be seen as a unidirectional shift.

[37] Peçevi, *Peçevi Tarihi I*, 316

[38] Aziz Efendi, *Kanûn-Nâme-i Sultânı li Aziz Efendi*, 14–15.

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It is within this geo-political context that we can locate Safavid patronage of the ruling house of Bitlis. After their failure to maintain their grip on Kurdistan during the reign of Isma'il I, the Safavids attempted to emulate the Ottoman policy of pursuing conciliation with the Kurdish elite. The young Şeref Xan was a key figure in the new Safavid strategy. From a very young age he was groomed by the Iranians to take on a role as a pro-Safavid Kurdish leader. He was given titles denoting leadership over the Kurds, the logic seeming to be that Şeref Xan would be able to bring other Kurdish princes and tribes over to the Iranian side. This gambit ultimately broke down when the man in whom they had placed their hopes defected to the Ottomans, although this setback by no means signaled an end to competition between the two empires for the affections of the princes.[39]

The Political Mission of the Sharafnama*: A Call for Kurdish Statehood?*

From this sketch of Şeref Xan's career and the political situation in Kurdistan during the sixteenth century, we might be able to begin to both bring into relief the political mission of the *Sharafnama* and uncover Şeref Xan's motives for writing such an account.

The introduction of the *Sharafnama* contains a warning to those imperial states against attempting to establish a *direct* administration over the region:

> Mighty kings and great monarchs ... have not coveted the [Kurds'] territories and country, and have instead been content with their tribute and consent to [abide by the kings'] herald and call to expedition. If on occasion some kings have tried and endeavored for the conquest and occupation of the lands of Kurdistan, they have suffered untold pain and torment, and at the end have had to return it with repentance and disappointment to its ... masters.[40]

It is interesting that, at the same time, in issuing a stern warning to would-be conquerors, Şeref Xan indicates that vassalage is a perfectly acceptable state of affairs. In a sense, this passage contained what might be described as a "proto-federalist" message, in which both the center and periphery maintain certain "inalienable" rights and privileges. In more concrete terms, while wishing to maintain the political autonomy, he had no desire to oust his Ottoman overlords completely from the region.

History, consequently, becomes a tool through which the autonomy of the Kurdish princes is justified and legitimized. More specifically, as Hassanpour notes, Şeref Xan wished to demonstrate, through the judicious use of historical precedent, that the Kurds were a people with a tradition of governing.[41] At the very beginning of

[39] For example, as late as the nineteenth century, the defection of the Mahmûd Pasha Babanî, the ruler of the Baban principality, from the Ottomans to the Iranians precipitated the Ottoman–Iranian War of 1820–1821. Sabri Ateş, "Empires and the Margin: Towards a History of the Ottoman–Iranian Borderland and Borderland Peoples" (PhD diss., New York University, 2006), 74–5.

[40] Şerefhan, *Şerefname*, 24.

[41] Hassanpour, "Making the Kurdish Identity: Pre-20th Century Historical and Literary Discourses," 112.

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Sharafnama, Şeref Xan outlines a political rationale behind writing his history of the Kurds, or, more precisely, of the *ruling houses* of Kurdistan. He complains of the lack of a work detailing the history of the rulers of Kurdistan and states that his purpose in writing was so that "the memory of the active role played in Kurdistan's general life by the Kurdish dynasties will not remain obscured and hidden."[42]

It is clear from the outset that the author, who regarded himself as being amongst these ruling houses, had a strong political motive to compose such a work, namely to legitimize his membership of a community that possessed a glorious tradition of ruling. The very organization of the *Sharafnama* betrays this purpose. The main body of the work is divided into four sections relating the history of the rulers of Kurdistan. The first section is dedicated to those rulers of Kurdistan that "have raised the banner of independence and royalty (*saltanat*) and have been treated as such by historians."[43] The second section deals with "The Great Rulers of Kurdistan that did not reach the point of announcing their royalty and independence, but by themselves struck coins and had the Friday sermon[44] recited in their name."[45] The third covers "Kurdistan's other remembered rulers and princes."[46] The final section of the work discusses the "author's forefathers who are the princes and rulers of Bitlis."[47]

As well as relating the dynastic myths of various rulers of Kurdistan, with a special emphasis on the history of his own family, Şeref Xan also lays claim to various historical and mythical figures as being of Kurdish origin. For example, he claims the legendary hero, Rostam bin Zal, one of the key dramatis personae in Firdawsi's poetic epic *Shahnama*, was a Kurd:

> As it is understood, the name "Kurd" was given to them [the Kurds] as a soubriquet due to the great degree of their bravery. The proof is that many famous heroes of the past and many well-known braves have come from this heroic nation. For example, the famous hero Rostam bin Zal who lived at the time of Kayqubad was of them [Kurds]. Since this hero was born in the region of Sistan he became famous as Rostam of Zal. The *Shahnama*'s writer Firdawsi introduces him as Rostam the Kurd.[48]

According to Mehrdad Izady, Şeref Xan's claims about Rostam bin Zal were merely the result of a misreading of the text. This is accounted for by the fact that in the Persian orthography used in the *Shahnama* كرد can be read as both the ethnonym

[42] Şerefhan, *Şerefname*, 13. These were: the Marwanids of Diyarbakir and Cezire, the Hassanwaihids of Dinever and Şehrizor, the Greater and Lesser Lurs and the Ayubbids of Syria and Egypt.
[43] Şerefhan, *Şerefname*, 14.
[44] The striking of coins and the reading of the Friday sermon in the name of the ruler are both symbolic acts denoting sovereignty in the Islamic world.
[45] Şerefhan, *Şerefname*, 14.
[46] Şerefhan, *Şerefname*, 15.
[47] Şerefhan, *Şerefname*, 16.
[48] Şerefhan, *Şerefname*, 21.

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Kord (Kurd) and the common noun *gord* (hero).[49] However, as Özoğlu points out correctly, it is doubtful that Şeref Xan, who was raised in the Iranian court and who no doubt read the *Shahnama*, misread the word "*gord*" as "*Kord*."[50] The tentative conclusion that might be inferred is that Şeref Xan seems to have deliberately manipulated the text of *Shahnama* to fit his political agenda: namely legitimizing and aggrandizing Kurdish society.

However, for Hassanpour, Şeref Xan's writings also constitute evidence of a "conscious effort to assert Kurdish statehood."[51] He sees Şeref Xan's writings as a rebuff to those Ottoman statesmen, such as Mustafa Ali, who advised the sultans against allowing any Kurd to hold high administrative positions as they would "never be fit to sit on the carpet of government and to distinguish right from wrong when two opposing parties turn to him."[52]

However, given the existence of alternative views expressed by men such as those of Peçevi İbrahim Efendi and Aziz Efendi, who like Mustafa Ali were also members of the Ottoman bureaucracy, it is hard to generalize about the attitudes of Ottoman officials towards the Kurdish princes. In addition, Mustafa Ali's apparent animosity towards the Kurds may have been motivated by more mundane factors.[53]

Although Şeref Xan, as noted above, wished to show the Kurds to be a people capable of governing, to claim that Şeref Xan wanted to assert a form of *Kurdish statehood* is farfetched. Hassanpour's conclusion is based on a passage in the *Sharafnama* which reads; "Within the Kurdish nation, none follows nor concurs with the other, nor is their solidarity amongst them," which he interprets as a complaint at the inability of the Kurds to unite and, therefore, assert statehood.[54] However, this observation is not followed by any explicit or implicit call for Kurdish statehood. Instead, Şeref Xan continues by relating a story accounting for this disunity. According to this myth, when the fame of Prophet Mohammad spread across the world many kings and rulers took notice, including mythical Oğuz Han, the supposed ruler of Turkistan. Consequently, he sent a delegation to Medina headed by a Kurdish nobleman by the name of Buğduz. However, on meeting Buğduz the Prophet deemed him so "ugly, boorish, cold hearted and unruly" that he immediately took a violent dislike to him. When he discovered that Buğduz was a Kurd, he cursed that entire people,

[49] See Izady's notes in Bitlisi, *The Sharafnama or the History of the Kurdish Nation*, 40.

[50] Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State*, 30.

[51] Hassanpour, "Making the Kurdish Identity: Pre-20th Century Historical and Literary Discourses," 112.

[52] Mustafa Ali, *Mustafa Ali's Counsel for Sultans of 1581*, trans. Andreas Tietze (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1979), 63. Quoted in Hassanpour, "Making the Kurdish Identity: Pre-20th Century Historical and Literary Discourses," 111.

[53] In 1585 Mustafa Ali received an appointment from Grand Vizier Özdemiroğlu Osman Pasha to the position of *defterdar* (financial director) of Baghdad. However, he found upon arrival that the position had been granted to the Kurdish *sancak beyi* of Derteng, Sohrab Beg. Cornell Fleischer, *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire: The Historian Mustafa Âli* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 119.

[54] Hassanpour, "Making the Kurdish Identity: Pre-20th Century Historical and Literary Discourses," 113. For the quote see Şerefhan, *Şerefname*, 22.

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entreating God not to let that community be successful in uniting, lest they "destroy the world with their own hands."[55] This story seems to be a *rationalization* of Kurdish disunity, rather than a complaint about it.

In fact, if we look at the *Sharafnama* more closely, it becomes clear that it was neither a call for Kurdish independence nor an indictment of the Ottoman sovereignty. Şeref Xan spoke glowingly of the Ottomans and the system of princely self-rule which emerged after they established themselves in the region. Of particular interest is Şeref Xan's perception of *how* Ottoman power was established in Kurdistan in the aftermath of the Ottoman victory at Çaldıran and İdris-i Bitlisi's role in it.

> When the Sultan's [Selim I] army returned from Tabriz to Rum [Anatolia], the thinker İdris, in the name of the Kurdish princes forwarded a report to the throne of the most esteemed Sultanate. The report made it explicit that in order to go to Diyarbakir together under the command of the Sultan and to eject the Safavid governor Qara Khan [the following measures were necessary]; he asked that, out of his grace, the Sultan would give them [the Kurdish princes] their traditional hereditary rights in order to find favor amongst them. He recommended that an important individual be raised to the rank of *beylerbeyi*. The Sultan responded positively and gave this answer: "Let the Kurdish princes and rulers choose one from amongst themselves who all of them can obey and bow to and who can take the responsibility for position of *beylerbeyi* and under whose command the *Qezelbash* can be struck and ejected them from the country." Thereafter, the thinker İdris sent one more report which stated "Here there is plurality rather than unity. All say "It can only be me; it cannot be anyone else but me." No one obeys anyone else. Since the supreme goal is to destroy the *Qezelbash* community and to take actions to destroy the *Qezelbash*'s coherence, under these circumstances, it would be better to appoint someone from amongst the Sultan's palace retinue who all the Kurdish princes can obey and submit to the orders of. Thus, this work will be completed in the quickest and best way." Following this, a written order was given appointing Çavuşbaşı Mehmed Ağa, who is known as Bıyıklı Mehmed, as *beylerbeyi* of the province of Diyarbakir and commander the armies of Kurdistan with the purpose of taking that province back from the foreigners and bringing it back under the sovereignty [of the Sultan].[56]

Other sources paint a different picture of the Ottoman conquest of Kurdistan.[57] However, the question of whether the *Sharafnama* gives an accurate picture of the historical events is of secondary importance. Of greater interest is the *perception* of how Ottoman power was established in Kurdistan and İdris-i Bitlisi's role in it.

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[55] Şerefhan, *Şerefname*, 22–3

[56] Şerefhan, *Şerefname*, 320.

[57] Other sources indicated that Sultan Selim had promised Bıyıklı Mehmed Pasha the governorship of Kurdistan prior to the 1515 campaign of relieve Diyarbakir from Safavid forces under that command of Qara Khan. See İlhan, *Amid*, 12.

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The image presented is of Ottoman sovereignty over Kurdistan being established with the *consent* of the Kurdish princes.[58] İdris-i Bitlisi, far from being seen as an enemy of the Kurds, is implicitly praised for his wisdom and his cool-headedness. Indeed, it is highly probable that Şeref Xan's account of the Selim's conquest of Kurdistan greatly exaggerated Shah Isma'il's anti-Kurdish proclivities. Numerous sources attest to the fact that a number of Kurdish tribes were counted amongst Isma'il's *Qezelbash* forces at Çaldıran, and even after Isma'il's defeat Kurdish princes of Erciş and Adilcevaz remained under Safavid influence.[59]

Examples of this pro-Ottoman bias occur throughout the *Sharafnama*. The work was dedicated to Ottoman Sultan Mehmet III (r. 1595–1603)[60] and included an appendix detailing the history of the Ottoman sultans as well as the great rulers of Iran and Turan. Moreover, in the introduction Şeref Xan commended the Ottomans for bringing security to his homeland which had afforded him the opportunity to write:

> The spread of God's holy light and the wind of divine grace, all of a sudden, began to enlighten these wounded breasts and hearts. Thanks to the goodness and justice of the omnipotent [Ottoman] Sultan, oppression was lifted. After that, the poor and powerless ones' hearts found peace in their homes and homelands. Their lives were restored. The flock and other groups began to melt into pleasure, safe in the cradle of security and without any concern or any deficiency in their happiness. Thus, at this time too, this poor one's thoughts returned to the hearts of the various rulers and administrators in various periods and epochs.[61]

However, *Sharafnama* goes much further than simply praising the sultan. It presents the Kurds as loyal subjects of the Ottomans. Crucial in this is the religious affinity between the Kurds and the Sunni Ottomans. As the conflict with Iran escalated in the sixteenth century, the Ottoman state increasingly attempted to present itself as the champion of "orthodox" Sunni Islam vis-à-vis "heretical" Shi'ite Islam represented by the Safavid dynasty. Şeref Xan commends the Ottoman sultan for being the champion of Islam and the protector against "innovation and perversion."[62] Şeref Xan places the Kurds on the right side of the ideological divide by asserting that "the majority of Kurdish society is Sunni and connected to Shafiite School of jurisprudence."[63]

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[58] Kurdish intellectuals during the early twentieth century continued to maintain that the Kurds had joined the Ottoman Empire of the own volition. See for example Zeki Beg, *Kürtler ve Kürdistan Tarihi*, 167–8; Rafiq Hilmi, *Kurdistan at the Dawn of the Century (Yaddasht)* (London: New Hope, 1998), 20–21; Sureya Bedr Khan, "The Case of Kurdistan against Turkey (1928)," *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies* 18, no. 1–2 (2004): 123.

[59] See Tansel, *Yavuz Sultan Selim*, 80. Also see Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, 140; Genç et al., *İranlı Tarihçilerin Kaleminden Çaldıran*, 119, 138 and 187.

[60] Şerefhan, *Şerefname*, 11.

[61] Şerefhan, *Şerefname*, 13.

[62] Şerefhan, *Şerefname*, 11.

[63] Şerefhan, *Şerefname*, 20.

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In addition, he presents a historical affinity between the House of Osman and the Kurdish people by claiming a Kurdish presence at the center of the Ottoman state from its very earliest years in the form of "Mevlana Taceddin-i Kürdi who was first a teacher in the city of Bursa and later Ottoman Sultan Orhan's Grand Vizier and who became famous with the name Hayreddin Pasha was also a Kurd."[64]

However, Şeref Xan goes further than connecting Kurds to the Sunni Islam of the Ottomans or associating Kurdish figures with early Ottoman rulers. He links Kurdish *ethnic myths* to Ottoman *dynastic myths*. For instance, the abovementioned fable explaining the disunity of the Kurds explicitly associates them with the mythical Turkish leader Oğuz Han, a figure from whom the Ottoman dynasty claimed descent. It should be noted that, despite imperial claims to imperial universality, ethnic and regional solidarity were not entirely absent from Ottoman politics, even at the very highest levels of state.[65] In the case of Şeref Xan too, we see a form of "ethno-politics" in play. However, it was not mobilized in order to assert a right to statehood—i.e. in a nationalistic sense—but rather to highlight the links between the Kurds and the Ottoman dynasty. Therefore to ignore the unmistakably pro-Ottoman sympathy of the *Sharafnama* is to ignore a central aspect of the work's political meaning.

The Sharafnama *and Ethnicity: Who Were the Kurds and What Did Kurdishness Mean?*

Unquestionably, Şeref Xan had a notion of a separate Kurdish ethnic identity. For instance, he mentions a number of theories on the genesis of his people including the myth that they were descended from refugees from the cannibalistic ruler of Iran and Turan, Zuhhak, or perhaps the fruit of a union between the *jinn* (spirits) and the daughters of Eve.[66] However, quite paradoxically, at least to the modern mind, he also relates how a number of Kurdish dynasties have geologies leading back to important Arabo-Islamic figures.[67] This apparent contradiction can be accounted for by the importance of Islam in the Kurdish identity and, perhaps more significantly, in the legitimization of political power in the Islamic world.

This leads us to a final question. If the *Sharafnama* is to be understood within its political context, it is necessary to ask: who precisely were the Kurds of which Şeref Xan spoke and to what extent was this identity embraced or accepted? Özoğlu has claimed that Şeref Xan's own perception must have been shaped by his extensive contact with the Safavid bureaucracy during his formative years and so external classification of Kurds and Kurdistan must have shaped his perceptions. In other words, as Şeref Xan did not travel through all of the territory he defined as Kurdistan and examine the "Kurdishness" of each of the tribes, he most likely adopted the term

[64] Şerefhan, *Şerefname*, 22.

[65] See Metin Kunt, "Ethnic-Regional (Cins) Solidarity in the Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Establishment," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 5, no. 3 (1974): 233–9.

[66] Şerefhan, *Şerefname*, 18–19.

[67] For example, the rulers of Hakkâri were said to be of Abbasids lineage, while the rulers of Cezire the descendants of Khālid ibn al-Walīd, an important Arab general of the early Islamic period. Şerefhan, *Şerefname*, 76 and 94.

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Kurd from the Iranian imperial administration, which had already defined who the Kurds were.[68]

We should be careful of assuming too much from this claim about Şeref Xan's understanding of the Kurdish identity. On a most basic level, besides to his interaction with the Iranian imperial administration, Şeref Xan was also in contact with members of the Rojkî tribe. Therefore, it is quite possible that at least some of his information on the Kurds and Kurdishness may have come via tribal channels.

More broadly, we ought to pay attention to the longer term evolution of the Kurdish community. A number of eminent scholars, including Özoğlu, have argued that in the Middle Ages the term Kurd did not represent any specific community of sentiment. Quite to the contrary, it has been claimed that the meaning of "Kurd" during the Middle Ages had socio-economic connotations as opposed to ethnic ones.[69] Nevertheless, recent research based on Arabic sources has called into question these claims. Although we will surely never know with any certainty whether the label "Kurd" was an invention of outsiders or not, Boris James has forcefully argued that the term was consistently used as an ethnonym throughout the medieval period and that after the eleventh century evidence found in Arabic sources suggests that it also represented a specific community of sentiment.[70]

Indeed, neither the Ottomans nor Safavids seem to have been the first to pursue a policy of "unite and rule" towards the Kurds. In fact, it had a precedent in the Mamluks of Egypt, who perused a similar, albeit not identical "Kurdish policy." During this period, the Kurdish-inhabited region of the *al-Jabal* (the Mountain), also known as *Jabal al-Akrād* (the Mountain of the Kurds) or simply *al-Akrād* (the

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[68] Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State*, 31.

[69] See Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State*, 23–7. Also see Hakan Özoğlu, "The Impact of Islam on Kurdish Identity Formation in the Middle East," in *The Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism*, ed. Mohammed M.A. Ahmed and Michael Gunter (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2007), 19–35. Similar views have been expressed by other scholars of Kurdish history. For instance, Vladimir Minorsky noted that "The vague and indiscriminate use of the term Kurd goes back to early times. According to Hamza Isfahani (circa 350/961) ... 'The Persians used to call Daylamites "the Kurds of Tabaristan", as they used to call Arabs "the Kurds of Suristan", i.e. of "Iraq".' Other Arab and Persian authors of the tenth century A. D. mean by Kurds any Iranian nomads of Western Persia, such as the tent-dwellers of Fars." Vladimir Minorsky, "The Gūrān," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 11, no. 1 (1943): 75–103. Wadie Jwaideh interprets this as meaning that Kurd was synonymous with "nomad." Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Its Origins and Development* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 12. In a similar vein, one Armenian scholar has argued that Kurd (Kurtān) in Pahlavi texts (sixth and seventh century) described a nomadic population; while in later Arabic and Persian (eighth to twelfth century) sources Kurd (Akrād/Kurdān) was synonymous with "nomads, cattle-breeders, brigands." Garnik Asatrian, "Prolegomena to the Study of the Kurds," *Iran and the Caucasus*, no. 13 (2009): 1–58 especially 28.

[70] James identified two broad stages in the evolution of the term Kurd in the Middle Ages: Phase One (ninth to eleventh centuries) and Phase Two (twelfth to fourteenth centuries). However, he contends that, although the term "Kurd" clearly changed its meaning and connotations over time, it was used consistently as an ethnonym. See Boris James, "Ethnonymes arabes ('aǧam, 'arab, badw, turk...): le cas kurde comme paradigm des façons de penser la difference au Moyen Âge," *Annales islamologiques* no. 42 (2008): 93–126.

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Kurds),[71] lay in the contested frontier zone between the Mamluk and Mongol empires and as such both powers were keen to assert their sovereignty over the region. In the certificate of succession of al-Malik al-Mansūr Qalāwūn (r. 1279–1290) to his son, this area, which was claimed as part of the Mamluk sphere, was described as *al-Mamlaka al-Hasīna al-Akrādiyya al-Jabaliyya wa Futūhātuhā* (the Inaccessible and Mountainous Realm of the Kurds and its Conquests). Therefore, the Mamluks were keen to win over the Kurdish tribal leaders in order to realize this claim. It is interesting to note that, in describing the Kurds, ibn Fadl Allāh al-'Umarī, a scholar and member of the Mamluk bureaucracy, made a very similar point on the issue of Kurdish "disunity" to that made by Şeref Xan and ascribed to İdris-i Biltisi in the *Sharafnama*. He posited that if it were not for their incessant feuding, "they [the Kurds] would pour into the lands and would seize many goods. However, they are inclined toward disagreement and dissension."[72] Thus, as both the Ottomans and Safavids would do in later centuries, the Mamluks endeavored to mobilize the Kurdish tribes' powerful, although flawed, *'Asabiyya* (esprit de corps) through the creation of a post denoting leadership over the Kurdish tribes, the *Muqaddam al-Akrād* (the generalissimo of the Kurds). In the *wasiyya* (recommendation letter) that was sent to the *Muqaddam al-Akrād*, it was stated that his primary mission was to unite the Kurds and "to prepare them for the battle against the unbelievers [Mongols?]."[73] Thus, as James has noted, this policy of ethnic engineering "was aimed at maintaining Kurdish difference and creating an interface that united and controlled this differentiated group."[74]

Consequently, while not ignoring the impact of "outside powers" on the evolution of the Kurdish identity, it seems likely that both the Safavid and Ottoman bureaucracy's conception of the Kurds had already been shaped and determined by the presence of a pre-existing ethnic community, which included at least some individuals with a notion of some trans-tribal Kurdish identity. Indeed, it might be hypothesized that the *Sharafnama* was the *culmination* of processes by which those groups described as Kurds in Islamic sources came to internalize this designation.

To return to Şeref Xan's own perceptions, given the focus of the *Sharafnama* on the ruling houses and tribes of Kurdistan, it is probable that the term Kurd did not include all Kurdish speakers. It is almost certain that Şeref Xan would not have regarded the average Kurdish-speaking Muslim (or non-Muslim) peasant as being "Kurdish." From the subject matter in *Sharafnama*, it is likely that only the tribal, princely and religious classes would have been included in his conception. Therefore, Şeref Xan's Kurds might be best described as what Anthony D. Smith has termed "a lateral" or

[71] The labeling of this region as "Kurdish" does not imply that Kurds constituted a demographic majority.

[72] Ibn Fadl Allāh al-'Umarī, *al-Ta'rīf bil-Mustalah al-Sharīf*, ed. D. Samîr al-Durûbî (Jīmi'at mu'ta, 1992), 47.

[73] Al-'Umarī, *al-Ta'rīf bil-Mustalah al-Sharīf*, 147.

[74] Boris James, "The Construction of a Kurdish Political Space in the Middle Ages: Kurdish 'In-betweenness', Mamlûk Ethnic Engineering and the Emergence of 'al-mamlaka al-hasîna al-akrâdiyya'" (forthcoming).

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"aristocratic" *ethnie*. That is to say, an ethnic identity which only encompassed the very top layer of what today we might regard as Kurdish society.[75]

The concurrent question then is how far the people Şeref Xan regarded as Kurds accepted this designation. With regard to the tribal population it is impossible to make any firm assertions. Certainly Ottoman bureaucratic practices recognized the Kurdish tribes as a distinct entity. After the conquest of Eastern Anatolia, and in addition to recognizing the Kurdish principalities, the Ottomans also sought organize and administer the region's nomadic population, which included many groups described as Kurds. For instance, in the sixteenth century, two grand tribal federations were recognized: the *Kara Ulus* (the Black Federation) consisting largely of nomadic Kurds and the *Boz Ulus* (the Grey Federation) consisting largely of nomadic Turkmen.[76] The tribal population of Aleppo was registered in a similar manner, with the 1518 *Tahrîr Defteri* (tax registers) noting the existence of four largely Kurdish tribal federations in the region: the *Ekrad*, the *Süleymaniye*, the *Çubî* and the *Alikanlu*.[77]

It is difficult to know how the Ottomans came to classify some tribes as Kurdish and others as Turkmen or Arab, although it would seem likely that the labeling of certain tribes as Kurdish was not entirely the result of arbitrary decisions made by Ottoman officials.[78] In later periods we do get hints that at least some tribesmen regarded themselves on some level as Kurdish. Claudius Rich, a British visitor to the Kurdistan in the early nineteenth century, observed that the "peasantry in Koordistan are a totally distinct race from the tribes."[79] Rich later reported a local tribal headman had complained to him that "The Turks call us all Koords, and have no conception of the distinction between us; but we are quite a distinct people from the peasants; and they have the stupidity which the Turks are pleased to attribute to us."[80] Nonetheless, we should be wary of assuming that a Kurdish tribesman's notion of Kurdishness translated as anything other than a feeling of superiority to the peasant. For them the tribe remained the pre-eminent political unit.

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[75] The aristocratic *ethnie* is contrasted to a demotic ethnic identity which is not based on class but upon a strong sense of cultural (or religious) unity. See Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 52–4; Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 193–4. Martin van Bruinessen makes a similar point. See Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurdish Society, Ethnicity, Nationalism and Refugee Problem," in *The Kurds: A Contemporary Overview*, ed. Philip Kreyenbroek and Stefan Sperl (London: Routledge, 1992), 39.

[76] Martin van Bruinessen, "Introduction," in *Evliya Çelebi in Diyarbekir*, ed. Martin van Bruinessen and Hendrik Boeschoten (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), 27.

[77] T.C. Başbakanlik Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü, 397 *Numarali Haleb Livâsi Mufassal Tahrîr Defteri, (943/1536)* (Ankara: Osmanlı Arşivi Daire Başkanlığı, 2010), 40–42.

[78] Nevertheless, as Reşat Kasaba has noted, Ottoman policies most likely did have an influence of the survival of the Kurds as a distinct group. Reşat Kasaba, *A Moveable Empire: Ottoman Nomads, Migrants and Refugees* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 25.

[79] Claudius James Rich, *Narrative of a Residence in Koordistan, and on the Site of Ancient Nineveh; with Journal of a Voyage down the Tigris to Bagdad and an Account of a Visit to Shirauz and Persepolis* (London: James Duncan, 1836), 80. He notes the distinction between the "Sipah," i.e. the military/clannish Kurds, and the "Rayah" or "Keuylees," i.e. the peasantry.

[80] Rich, *Narrative*, 89.

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It is perhaps possible to make stronger assertions about the religious classes. The dervish Ehmedê Xanî's Kurdish language epic *Mem û Zîn*, written in the late seventeenth century, has often been cited by Kurdish nationalists as evidence of the desire of the Kurds to determine their own future. In the piece Xanî took pride in the Kurdish language, complained bitterly about the Kurds' position between the Ottomans and Iranians and called for a Kurdish king. Thus, Xanî's *Mêm û Zîn*, a work which no doubt circulated widely in the madrasas of Kurdistan, has been regarded by many Kurdish nationalists as irrefutable evidence of a Kurdish national consciousness. Such views are the result of a retrospective reading of the work and it has been argued that Xanî's desire for a Kurdish king is very different from the modern demand for a nation-state.[81] Nonetheless, *Mem û Zîn* clearly indicates that at least some sections of the *ulema* regarded themselves as Kurds and, moreover, attached a level of political importance to this identity.

It is with regard to the princely classes, those families and dynasties that lay at the center of Şeref Xan's work, that we can draw the most interesting conclusions. As a group positioned at the summit of Kurdish tribal structures, they seem to have regarded themselves as the aristocracy of the Kurds and so attached a political significance to idea that the Kurds constituted a specific ethnic community. In the centuries between the completion of the *Sharafnama* and the dissolution of the Kurdish principalities in the mid-nineteenth century, the rulers of other Kurdish principalities commissioned copies of the work. In 1684 Şam'i, a scribe in the service of Mistafa Beg, the ruler of the principality of Eğil, completed a translation into Ottoman Turkish and included an appendix relating the histories of the Eğil and Palu principality between 1597 and 1684. As late as 1810, the rulers of Erdilan, a Kurdish principality that had remained within the Iranian sphere of influence after the sixteenth century, commissioned a copy of the *Sharafnama* that included an appendix covering the history of the Erdilan dynasty's intervening years.[82] Such developments are interesting in that they demonstrate the significance of the Kurdish identity to the princes. For instance, one particularly interesting line from the Erdilan appendix notes that under the orders of Shah Abbas I (r. 1571–1629), the son of the Halo Xan, the Erdilan prince, had been taken to the Safavid court where Safavids attempted to turn him into a *Qezelbash* by ridding him of his "Kurdish and tribal customs and clothing (*ādat va ravīye-ye kordi va ashīratī*)".[83] This line shows that there was a well developed sense of ethno-cultural difference amongst certain sections of Kurdish society.

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[81] See Martin van Bruinessen, "Ehemdi Xani's *Mêm û Zîn* and Its Role in the Emergence of Kurdish National Awareness," in *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism*, ed. Abbas Vali (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2003), 40–57.

[82] For detailed information on the *Sharafnama* manuscripts see Anwar Soltani, "The Sharafnama of Bitlisi Manuscript Copies, Translations and Appendixes," *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies* 20, no. 1–2 (2006): 209–14. Also see Anwar Soltani, *35 Destnûsî Şerefnamey Betlîsî le Kitêbxanekanî Cîhan* (Jönköping: Kitêbî Erzan, 1997).

[83] Mihemed Ebrahim Ardalani, *The History of Ardalanids (1590–1810)*, ed. Nasrin Borna and Anwar Soltani (Stockholm: Nawroz förlag, 1997), 73.

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The production of copies of the *Sharafnama* and of appendixes indicates that the work was for many of the Kurdish princes an articulation of group identity *or became so over time*.[84] In effect they were the rightful rulers of the Kurdish community, bound together by a shared identity and destiny. However, this sense of a shared identity should not be confused with the principle of modern nationalism. Cultural commonalty did not imply the need for the creation of a national state, rather it hinted at the necessity of the imperial states pursuing particular policies towards the Kurdish periphery. In this sense, the *Sharafnama* can be said to have played the role of a "constitution" for the Kurdish princes. It gave an idealized picture of how Kurdistan came under Ottoman rule and, more generally, it showed through the use of historical examples how the relationship between the Kurd princes and the imperial state *should* be. Here the contrast is drawn between the Safavids, who usurped the rights of the Kurdish princes, and the Ottomans, who respected them. Hence, the Kurds' loyalty, as well as Şeref Xan's defection, to the Ottoman Empire was justified.

Beyond the Sharafnama*: From "Ethnic Community" to "Modern Nation"*

In this article I have attempted to draw a distinction between, on the one hand, the idea of a Kurdish "ethno-politics" manifest in the *Sharafnama* as well as the existence of a Kurdish ethnic identity in the early modern period, which at least for some Kurds had political implications, and, on the other hand, modern Kurdish nationalism. Few scholars of serious standing would reject the idea that some form of Kurdish identity existed prior to the advent of nationalism (although debates on its extent and meaning abound). What has, however, been rejected by some recent modernist scholarship is that there exists any meaningful link between the *longue durée* evolution of Kurdishness and emergence of modern Kurdish nationalism.[85]

Certainly, one should avoid essentializing the Kurdish identity; evidently Kurdishness has not only had different meanings in different periods but also different meanings to different groups within the same era. Equally, one ought not overplay the impact of "pre-nationalist" notions of Kurdishness on the construction of modern forms of Kurdish identity politics, the vicissitudes of the recent history the Middle East have without doubt had a greater impact on how Kurds mobilize their ethnic identity today. Nevertheless, although the phenomenon of Kurdish nationalism *par excellence* can be related to very specific historical circumstances and processes such as resistance to state centralization, imperial decline, intra-elite competition and the rise of nation-states, we should note that the "separatist option" was only one political route open to the Kurdish activists once they had come to see the Kurds as constitut-

[84] However, this seems not to be true in all cases. For instance, in 1849 Nurullah Beg, the prince of Hakkâri, was removed from his position in the aftermath of the revolt of Bedirxan Beg, the prince of Cezire. However, when interviewed he objected to his dismissal, arguing that he was not a member of that *zümre-i bağiyye* (rebellious community), i.e. the Kurds, but a descendant of the Abbasids. Clearly for this prince his Arabo-Islamic lineage took precedence over any sense of Kurdishness. BOA, İ.DH 193/10884, May 16, 1849.

[85] See Hakan Özoğlu, "Does Kurdish Nationalism have a Navel," in *Symbiotic Antagonisms*, ed. Ayşe Kadıoğlu and Fuat Keyman (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2011), 199–222.

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ing a "nation" in the modern sense.[86] Moreover, the emergence of a Kurdish national movement as well as the conceptual (re)construction of the Kurdish *ethnie* as a modern nation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was in part influenced by the legacy of earlier periods. It is surely no accident that many of the pioneers of modern forms of Kurdish identity politics in this period were the descendants of Kurdish princely houses, most notably the Bedirxanîs of Cezire and the Babans of Sulaymaniyah.[87]

Indeed, the encounter of older notions of Kurdishness and modern modes of Kurdish identity politics is nowhere more apparent than in the first Kurdish newspaper, *Kürdistan* (Kurdistan), published between 1898 and 1902 by two sons of Bedirxan Beg, the last prince of Cezire. The newspaper's editors, Mîqdad Mîdhet Bedirxan (Mikdat Midhat Bedirhan) and Ebdurrehmen Bedirxan (Abdurrahman Bedirhan), were without doubt men of the modern world. Both had been educated in the "modern" Ottoman Imperial High School at Galata and were familiar with western languages and ideologies. Both men had also fled the regime of Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909) to join the "Young Turks" in their struggle for a meritocratic and constitutionalist empire. The mission they ascribed to their publication, although not "nationalist," was certainly modernist, namely that of "awaking the study of arts amongst the Kurds."[88] Yet, alongside this self-conscious modernizing mission, we see the older "princely" notion of Kurdishness at work. In an open letter to the sultan explaining the rationale behind publishing the paper, Miqdad described himself as being "from the most distinct Kurdish princes (*ümera-i Ekradın mümtazlarından*)."[89] In another article, this time calling on Kurdish notables to seek education, he declared: "*Ulema*, princes (*mîr*) and tribal leaders (*axa*) of the Kurdish people! You all know my origins. My ancestor was Khālid ibn al-Walīd, our tribe is Bohtan and our famous bloodline is the Azîzan."[90] Thus Mîqdad legitimized himself with reference to both his Arabo-Islamic genealogy and his princely origins.

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[86] Ellen Comisso notes, in her investigation of the role of nationalism in the dissolution of Europe's multi-national empires, that while modernization did result in increasing "national" consciousness and political activities by groups claiming to speak in the name of their particular ethnic constituency, this did not translate "inevitably" into demands for an independent nation-state. A number of stratagems, besides separatism, remained open to the ethnic activists including accommodation, defection and assimilation. See Ellen Comisso, "Empires as Prisons of Nations Versus Empires as Political Opportunity Structures: An Exploration of the Role of Nationalism in Imperial Dissolution in Europe," in *Empire to Nation*, ed. Joseph W Esherick, Hasan Kayalı and Eric van Young (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 144–53.

[87] See Djene Bajalan, "Osmanlı Devleti, Osmanlı-Kürt Aydın Sınıfı ve "Jön Kürtçülük" Akımı Üzerine (1898–1909)," *Dipnot*, no. 2 (2010): 141–57.

[88] See *Kürdistan*, 9 Nisan 1314 (April 21, 1898). This was later changed to "A Kurdish newspaper published every fifteen days which encourages scientific and artistic education amongst the Kurds and includes Kurdish literature and works." See *Kürdistan*, 7 Mayıs 1314 (May 19, 1898).

[89] Mîqdad Mîdhet Bedirxan, "Şevketlu Azmetlu Sultan Abdülhamid-i Sanî Hazretlerine Arzıhal-i Abîdanemdir," *Kürdistan* 7 Mayıs 1314 (May 19, 1898).

[90] Mîqdad Mîdhet Bedirxan, "Untitled", *Kürdistan*, 9 Nisan 1314 (April 21, 1998).

These examples show the memory of the older notions of Kurdishness, which would have been understandable to Şeref Xan, coalescing with the modernist quest for national progress and enlightenment. In other words, the Bedirxan notion that they were both the rightful leaders of Kurdish society and the correct interlocutors between the Ottoman state and Kurdish society, claims implicit in the abovementioned examples, derived from the memory that they were Kurdish princes.[91] However, their desire to modernize their community—their nation—stemmed from their encounter with modern ideological trends. Therefore, when attempting to understand the emergence of *modern* Kurdish ethno-politics (of which Kurdish nationalism is but one manifestation), in particular its early phases during the late Ottoman and Qajar period, it would be remiss to ignore some of the interesting linkages between "traditional" and "modern" forms of ethno-politics. The *Sharafnama* may have been written at a time when the modern nation had yet to be conceived; nonetheless the sentiments which it expressed would weigh upon on the princely pioneers of the Kurdish national movement.

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[91] Members of the Bedirxan family, who would play a leading role in the Kurdish movement right down to the 1940s, continued to regard themselves as "crown princes" and "kings" of Kurdistan. Even as late as the 1970s Kamuran Bedirxan, a professor at the Sorbonne, styled himself as "emir" or "prince."