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THE OTHER *NAHDĀH*: THE BEDIRXANS, THE MILLÎS
AND THE TRIBAL ROOTS OF KURDISH NATIONALISM IN SYRIA*

Introduction

The study of Kurdish nationalism and its history in Syria has been much impelled by current affairs in the past years, from the emergence of Iraq's Kurds as a quasi-independent polity in the Middle East, to the significant relaxation of restrictions on Kurdish language and press in Turkey, to the new push for political liberalization in Syria itself. Both in the region and among the important émigré communities of Sweden and Germany, there has been an unprecedented output of popular magazines, memoirs, and private documents pertaining to Kurdish culture and history, while a growing body of specialized research is today contributing to carving a place for Kurdish studies in western academia. Much of this literary production has understandably focused on the icons of Kurdish national identity construction in modern times, on the writers, activists and political leaders who personify the epic quest for the rights and recognition of an entire people. In this respect, Syria has had a disproportionately prominent place in the history of Kurdish nationalism, playing host, under French mandatory rule, to the literary and intellectual movement that would standardize the Kurmanci Kurdish language and establish the struggle for Kurdish self-determination as a key problem of interstate politics in the region. In particular, the pioneering journalistic activities of the Bedirxan brothers in Damascus and Beirut, and the educational and social welfare programs initiated with other Kurdish leaders under the auspices of the Xwebûn committee, mark Syria and Lebanon as the motherland not only of the Arabic literary revival of the 19th century, but also of the equally portentous movement that can rightly be called the Kurdish *nahdah* in the 20th.

The concentration by historians on the intellectual luminaries of the Kurdish renaissance, however, has perhaps too one-sidedly emphasized the trans-national character of the Kurdish struggle in Syria, with the Bedirxans appearing as political émigrés who might as well be based in Paris or Lausanne and the Xwebûn committee as a government in exile whose real interests lie essentially across the

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border in Turkey and Iraq. The aim of this contribution is to collate the Bedirxan brothers' initiatives with the role played by less well-known but more locally rooted Kurdish activists in mandate Syria, and to suggest that not all Syrian Kurds necessarily embraced Xwebûn's internationalist orientation or its goal of an independent Kurdish state. The first section will treat the origins of the Bedirxans and their contribution to the rise of Kurmanci-language publishing in Syria, but will make special reference to lesser known members of the family as well as to other Xwebûn associates who understood themselves primarily as officers of the state in Syria. The second section will examine the history of the Milî confederation, the Kurdish tribal group with the arguably deepest political roots in geographic Syria, and their ambivalent relationship to the Kurdish movement following the First World War. By directing our attention toward the more obscure local and tribal roots of Kurdish activism in Syria, it becomes possible to see that the movement was not uniformly advantaged by the French mandatory power but, on the contrary, in many cases joined forces with other Syrian nationalists in the anti-colonial struggle.

1. *The Botan Emirate, 1514-1847*

The Bedirxan brothers who were to play such a pivotal role in the articulation of a Kurdish national identity in Damascus and Beirut were scions of the semi-autonomous emirate that ruled Cizre (Ğazîrat Ibn 'Umar) in Botan, just across the Tigris from what is today Syria, for much of the Ottoman period. Like several other principalities of Ottoman Kurdistan, the Cizre emirate was formed after the leading feudal families in the region swore fealty to the sultanate, following the defeat of the Shiite Safavids at Çaldıran in 1514, in return for their recognition as local hereditary governors. The Bedirxans claim descent from the first emirs of Botan, the Azîzan clan, relatives of the Şerefxans of Bedlis who were the engineers—as well as the only contemporary historiographers—of this Ottoman-Kurdish rapprochement.¹ Beyond that there has actually been very little historical investigation of the emirates (*beğlik* or *hukümet*), whose precise status and territorial delimitation, as Hakan Özoğlu has recently shown, fluctuated over time in accordance with internal power struggles as well as the Ottoman state's periodic attempts to impose more direct control.² Chancery documents from the 16th century record in some detail the career of “Bedir Beğ”, quite likely a direct forebear of the famous 19th-century emir Bedir H(x)an Beğ for whom the family is known, as “ruler” (*hakim*) of Cizre. Throughout the 1570's, this Bedir Beğ was called upon to assist in putting down refractory tribes in the region as well to join the imperial campaigns against Iran; by 1578, however, his son and pre-

1 – On the Botan emirate's origins see especially Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan*, London and New Jersey, Zed Books, 1992, p. 177-178; Martin Strohmeier and Lale-Yalçın Heckmann, *Die Kurden: Geschichte, Politik, Kultur*, Munich, Beck, 2000, p. 61-69.

2 – Hakan Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries*, Albany, SUNY, 2004, p. 47-59.

sumably at this point his successor, *seyyid* Mihemed Beğ, was being reprimanded for oppressing villages in his area of fiscal control.³ There is little that distinguishes the emirate in later decades, when in any event it formed part of the *eyalet* of Diyarbekir. If there was an actual tribe known as the Azîzan, they are barely accounted for in Ottoman administrative records, even at a time when the entire region came within the purview of a massive imperial program of tribal settlement and relocation in the late 17th and 18th century.⁴ It is likely that the rule of the Azîzan emirs did not extend very far beyond Cizre into Kurdish tribal areas.

The Botan emirate is brought back into the full light of history by the Ottoman state's centralization policies in the 19th century. In 1834 the Ottomans under Mehmed Reşid Paşa began a campaign to reincorporate Kurdistan as a prelude to reconquering Syria from Mehmed Ali of Egypt, first eliminating the Bahdînan and Soran emirates. Cizre too was taken in 1838, but Ottoman prestige in the area suffered a decisive blow with the defeat against the Egyptians at Nizib (near Birecik) the following year. From then on, Bedir Han Beğ was able to create a veritable Kurdish tribal monarchy in south-eastern Anatolia. Foreign missionary reports in particular dwell on his coercion of the region's Nestorians, who like Christians elsewhere in the Empire were becoming a *cause célèbre* in Europe. Though the Botan emirate would later be portrayed as the germ of a Kurdish national entity, it was as much Bedir Han's autarchy vis-à-vis the central administration as western political pressure that caused the Ottomans to reduce it by force in 1847. Bedir Han Beğ was honourably exiled to Crete and then allowed to return to Istanbul with the official rank of mirmiran in 1858. In 1865 he and his large immediate family moved to Damascus on an Ottoman pension, where he died a few years later.⁵

The Bedirxans in Syria

Over the next decades, Syria served as something of the Bedirxans' base of operations as they traversed and in many ways shaped the various stages of early Kurdish nationalism. Emin Ali Bedirxan, Bedir Han Beğ's most prominent son, briefly helped raise a Kurdish contingent against the Russians in the 1877-78 war before returning to Damascus, but then joined his brother Miqdad Midhat in a revolt against Ottoman forces around 1889. He was bought off with a mid-

3 – Başbakanlık Archives, Istanbul: Mühimme Defteri 3:129; 5:389-390, 697; 12:298; 14:919, 920; 16:264; 24:233; 26:226, 228, 289; 34:115. Kurdish names are transliterated according to standard modern Kurmanci orthography.

4 – The only larger group of this name in Ottoman sources, the Azizli of central Anatolia, apparently belonged to the Reşwan confederation. See Cevdet Türkay, *Başbakanlık Arşivi Belgelerine Göre Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Oymak, Aşiret ve Cemaatlar*, Istanbul, İşaret Yayınları, 2001, p. 187.

5 – Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, p. 178-180; Malmîsanîj, *Cızira Botanlı Bedirhaniler*, Istanbul, Avesta, 1994, p. 45-96; Şalâh Sâlim Harûrî, *Imârat Bûtân fî 'ahd al-Amîr Badr Hân 1821-1847: Dirâsah târîhiyyah siyâsiyyah*, Erbil, Mu'assasat Mawkriyânî, 2000; Kâmirân 'Abd al-Şamad Aḥmad al-Dūsakî, *Kurdîstân al-ʿuṣmâniyyah fî nisf al-awwal min al-qarn al-tâsiʿ ʿaşar*, Dohuk, Spirez, 2002, p. 108-153; Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables*, p. 70-72.

level provincial office, then exiled to Syria (Acre) once more for his purported role in a 1906 palace plot against Abdülhamid. Two years later he was back in Istanbul, where the family owned a summer mansion on Büyükkada, and became a founding member of the *Kürdistan Teavün ve Terakki Cemiyeti*, the Young Turk inspired “Society for Mutual Aid and Progress” that led the call for a Kurdish cultural awakening under Ottoman dominion.⁶ The radicalization of Kurdish national thought would devolve upon a younger generation of intellectuals, chief among them his three sons Surêya, Celadet and Kamran. They and other Istanbul-based activists and newspaper writers worked for the recognition of Kurdish rights within a progressive Turkish state right until 1919, when the start of Mustafa Kemal’s war of liberation against the allied occupation forces heralded the ascendancy of a militant Turkish ethnic nationalism. By then Surêya had already gone to join their uncle Miqdad to publish the first Kurdish newspaper, *Kürdistan*, in Cairo. Celadet and Kamran, on the other hand, set out from Aleppo with British army major E.M. Noel, the “Kurdish Col. Lawrence,” to see about establishing a British client state in south-central and eastern Anatolia.⁷ With the unmasking and expulsion of the Noel mission by the Kemalists in September 1919, however, the two brothers had little choice but to return to Syria indefinitely to continue their propaganda effort in favour of Kurdish nationhood.

Hawar (“The Cry for Help”), the first Kurdish-language newspaper to adopt use of the Latin alphabet, represents the Bedirxans’ most important contribution to the Kurdish *nahdah*. Launched in Damascus in 1932, it was discontinued intermittently over the next years but received renewed support from the French authorities during World War II and appeared again regularly, along with its illustrated supplement *Ronahî* (“Light”), between 1941 and 1943. Its siblings *Roja Nû* (“New Day”) and *Stêr* (“Star”) were published by Kamran in Beirut from 1943 to 1946. Together with the Kurdish-French dictionary that the Bedirxans compiled with the aid of the French orientalisks and mandate officers Roger Lescot and Pierre Rondot, these publications served to standardize the grammar and writing of modern Kurmanci Kurdish, and provided an important common reference for educated Kurds throughout the region.⁸ Their concern was not in any way with Kurds and Kurdish society in Syria. *Hawar*’s debut responded to

6 – Malmîsanîj, *Bedirhaniler*, p. 129-146; Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables*, 95-100. On the KTTC and its members’ activities, see Rohat Alakom, *Eski İstanbul Kürtleri (1453-1925)*, Istanbul, Avesta, 1998, p. 95-111, 227, 231; Martin Strohmeier, *Crucial Images in the Presentation of a Kurdish National Identity: Heroes and Patriots, Traitors and Foes*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2003, p. 36-55.

7 – David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, London – New York, I.B. Tauris, 1996, p. 128-129.

8 – See, in addition to the works already cited, Husên Hebeş, *Raperîna çanda Kurdi di koura hawarê de*, Bonn, Belavgeha Hogir, 1996; Şalâh Salim Harûrî, *Al-Urah al-Badr-Ĥânîyyah: Na-şâruhâ al-siyâsi wa ’l-îtaqâfi hîlâl al-muddah 1900-1950*, Dohuk, Spirez, 2003; Jordi Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil: continuités et discontinuités du nationalisme kurde sous le mandat français en Syrie et au Liban* (unpublished EHESS/University of Fribourg doctoral dissertation, 2004).

the radicalization of ethnic nationalism in Turkey and in particular the promulgation of the Turkish History Thesis in 1932, and it served the Bedirxans to in turn expound the Kurds' Aryan identity and their dissociation from the Turkic race. As per order of the French authorities, the newspapers were otherwise apolitical in content, and in any case incomprehensible to many Kurds especially in north-western Syria inasmuch as they consecrated the Bedirxans' native Botani as the one standard dialect of Kurmanci Kurdish. Celadet and Kamran's stewarding of the Kurdish *nahdah* in Syria ultimately aimed to build up and concretize their social capital within the nascent pan-Kurdish international, an important first step in reclaiming the political role the family had enjoyed as leaders of a semi-autonomous Kurdish principality in the past.⁹

Celadet and Kamran had both studied in Germany; Kamran spent much of his time in Paris and in fact moved there (teaching at the INALCO) after Syria was granted independence in 1946. Their principal stake in Syria was in seigniorial lands in the Ġazīrah that were once attached to the Botan emirate, which they hoped to re-develop with the help of French investors.¹⁰ Other members of the Bedirxan family, however, put down deeper roots in the country. Though less manifest and certainly less written about today, their involvement with local society, it may be argued, played an equally important part in the development of a Syrian Kurdish identity. Bedrî Paşa, for example, was among Bedir Han Beğ's eldest sons and heir-apparent to the emirate. Descended on his mother's side from the Yezidi Anqosî tribe, Bedrî Paşa raised 3000 troops in Syria for the Ottomans' 1877-78 war effort. He too was deported back to Syria for his role in a subsequent Anatolian revolt, but was awarded a district governorship in the troublesome Hawran region on account of his experience in tribal matters. Later he held offices in Tripoli and in Hama, both of which still had important Kurdish populations at the time.¹¹ Other relatives were appointed to Qunaytra, Dar'ah, Jerusalem, Hâşbayā and Hışn al-Akrād in the 1880's. The memoirs of Bedrî's nephew (and son-in-law) Mihemed Salih Bedirxan, whose father served in the tobacco *régie* in Latakia, Suwayda and finally Nabak, provide a richly detailed picture of a childhood spent in the Sūq Sarūğah and Qaymariyyah quarters of Damascus and of the family's Kurdish acquaintances there. Later, on business for his uncle among the Druze in the Hawran or the Shiites in Baalbek, Salih would be accompanied in almost classic Ottoman style by a mounted force of Kurdish retainers.¹² Lastly, Mihemed's daughter Rewşen became the best-known

9 – "The Bedirxans' investment in the Kurdish cultural renaissance", Tejel concludes, "can be seen as... a symbolic struggle to change the categories of perceiving... the social world and as a strategy for establishing a shared belief in the Bedirxans' prestige... so that the gains made in the field of culture can be reinvested in the field of politics in order to pursue the Bedirxans' political goals: ... an independent Kurdistan under their direction, Kurdish unity for their benefit, and the support of a foreign power". *Le mouvement kurde*, p. 261-262.

10 – "Correspondance des frères Bedir-Khan et Pierre Rondot", *Études Kurdes* 3 (2001), p. 83.

11 – Malmisani, *Bedirhaniler*, p. 127-129.

12 – Mehmet Salih Bedir-Han, *Defter-i A'malim: Mehmet Salih Bedir-Han'ın Anıları*. Ed. Mehmed Uzun & Rewşen Bedir-Han, Istanbul, Belge, 1998, p. 47-63, 79-82.

advocate of Kurdish culture in the country. A member of the Syrian Women's Union and delegate at the 1944 Women's World Congress in Cairo, Rewşen married Celadet Bedirxan and shared actively in his life's work. After his death she continued to write on Kurdish issues and participate in international conferences in addition to working as a schoolteacher. In 1956 she helped found the learning and mutual aid society *Komela Zanistî û Alikariya* in Aleppo, and she remained an active participant in Kurdish women's leagues in Syria and Iraq until her death in 1992.¹³

Xwebûn and its Discontents

The dichotomy between internationalist and localist approaches to Kurdish emancipation in Syria was reflected within the Xwebûn committee. Xwebûn ("Being oneself; Identity"), which brought together the Bedirxans and other leading Kurdish nationalists after the collapse of the Şêx Saîd rebellion, was founded in Beirut in 1927 in order to prepare the larger and more systematic revolt against Turkish rule at Ağrı Dağ (Ararat) in 1930. It worked closely with the Armenian separatist organisation Dashnak but soon ran afoul of the French mandate authorities, who could not allow the struggle for independence in Anatolia to become linked with domestic Kurdish issues in Syria. The Bedirxan brothers thus withdrew from the political leadership of Xwebûn, preferring to cultivate French support for their publications which, unsurprisingly, never mention Syrian lands as a part of Kurdistan. They personally were prohibited by the French from traveling east of the Euphrates in the Ġazîrah.¹⁴ Other members of Xwebûn, however, did become actively involved in politics in Syria. Qadrî Ġân, perhaps the best-known Kurdish poet of his generation, fled to Syria from Turkey around 1928. After learning Arabic and attending college in Salamyah, he was appointed as a teacher in Antioch, where he came into contact with the Arab nationalist movement, then in Qamişlî and finally in the Hayy al-Akrâd (Kurdish Quarter; today Rukn al-Dîn) in Damascus. He was a regular contributor to *Hawar* and maintained links to Kurdish nationalists in Iraq, but politically he aligned himself in 1944 with the Syrian Communist Party. He spent several years in Mezze prison, notably from 1959 to 1961, at the time of the United Arab Republic.¹⁵ And Elî Axa Zilfo, the son of a sheep exporter from Amed/Diyarbakir, became involved in rebel activities against the French in Damascus in 1925 before being arrested and imprisoned in Turkey for his part in a Kurdish insurrection there. He subsequently joined Xwebûn and became a leading "boss" (*za'im*) in the Hayy al-Akrâd, using his tribal prestige both to promote the Kurdish Mutual Aid Society and to continue fomenting revolt against the French.¹⁶

13 – Malmisani, *Bedirhaniler*, p. 211-221.

14 – "Correspondance des frères Bedir-Khan et Pierre Rondot", *Études Kurdes* 5 (2003), 71, p. 74.

15 – Qadrî Ġân, *Al-Katib al-Kurdi Qadri Jan (1911-1972): Qışa wa maqālât, şî'r, tarğamah*, Ed. Dilawur Zangî, transl. by Hürâmî Yazdî & D. Zangî, Erbil, Dār Arâs, 2001, p. 15-19.

16 – 'Izz al-Dîn 'Alî Mullâ, *Hayy al-Akrâd fî madînat Dimaşq bayna 'âmay 1250-1979 m: Di-*

Ultimately, most Kurds in Syria saw resistance against the Kemalists and resistance against French imperialism in the same terms. It is true that the Kurdish landed notable and anti-French resistance leader İbrahim Hanano only rallied to the Syrian national cause after his drive to restore Ottoman sovereignty in Aleppo with the help of Turkish defence committees in 1921 had failed.¹⁷ The largely rural population of the Ġazîrah and the Ḥayy al-Akrād, however, did not share Hanano's and the Bedirxans' Young Turk background and modernist ideals. It is perhaps telling that among a group of 13 rebels from the Ḥayy al-Akrād executed by France in 1926 for their role in the "Great Syrian Revolt," half were members of the Millî, Reşwan, Berazî and other tribes long established in northern Syria.¹⁸ The Millîs in particular remained as the dominant Kurdish tribal grouping on Syrian soil after World War I, the extent of their influence being indicated by the institution of a separate "Société de Bienfaisance de la tribu Milliye" in the Ḥayy al-Akrād during the French mandate.¹⁹ It is to their historic presence and contribution to the development of a Kurdish identity in Syria that we turn next.

II. Ottoman Tribal Politics in Northern Syria

Many of the Anatolian tribes settled in Syria after 1925 supported a Kurdish "tribal nationalism" and at the same time actively collaborated with the French regime. Hajo Axa of the Heverkan, to cite the best-known example, joined Xwebûn after fleeing the Tûr 'Abdîn in 1926, but like the Bedirxans soon devoted his attention to cultural affairs and especially to developing his extensive new landholdings in the Ġazîrah and cultivating French patronage.²⁰ By contrast, the Millî Kurds had much deeper historical roots in the area and consequently, it may be argued, a more ambivalent relationship to both the French mandate and the internationalist Kurdish cause. The Millî (Millo, Milan) are mentioned in Ottoman sources from the 16th century onward, when they controlled the southern piedmont of the Karaca Dağ and were frequently assigned to the *voyvodalık* (district governorship) of nearby Mardin and the Khabur valley, part of the province of Diyarbekir.²¹ Beginning in the late 17th century they came under the purview of the Empire's tribal sedentarization project, and were forced to settle

râsah târihiyyah, iğtimâ' iyyah, iqtisâdiyyah, Damascus and Beirut, Dâr Âsû, 1998, p. 132-133.

17 – Jean-David Mizrahi, "De la petite guerre à la guerre d'indépendance: pratique et expertise de la guérilla dans l'Empire ottoman finissant (1908-1923)", *Revue Historique des Armées* 66/2 (2003), p. 74-75; Keith Watenpugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism and the Arab Middle Class*, Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 174-182.

18 – Mullâ, *Ḥayy al-Akrād*, p. 141.

19 – Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde*, p. 263.

20 – Nelida Fuccaro, "Die Kurden Syriens: Anfänge der nationalen Mobilisierung unter französischer Herrschaft", in Carsten Borck et al., eds., *Ethnizität, Nationalismus, Religion und Politik in Kurdistan*, Münster, Lit, 1997, p. 316, 321-323.

21 – On the Millîs' origins see now especially Ercan Gümüş, "XVI. Yüzyıldan XIX. Yüzyıla kadar Mardin İdaresinde Milli Aşireti ve Aşiretin Nüfuz Mücadeleleri", in İbrahim Özcoşar & Hüseyin Güneş, eds., *I. Uluslararası Mardin Tarihi Sempozyumu Bildirileri*, Istanbul, s.n., 2006, p. 815-829.

first around Amed and then in the *eyalet* of Raqqa. They frequently quit the lands assigned to them to return north to better pastures, however, and quickly acquired a reputation as being among the most rebellious tribes in the Raqqa sedentarization program (*Rakka iskanı*). In 1723, for example, a group of Millî Kurds was accused of ruining gardens and stealing livestock in Maraş after having absconded from Raqqa to resume nomadism; in 1746 another group from Urfa robbed the imam of Ergani of 300 sheep, sparking an official protest in Istanbul. At other times the Millîs taxed and otherwise oppressed tribes coming south to Raqqa for winter grazing.²²

Around the middle of the century the Ottoman state attempted to co-opt the Millîs' tribal leaders in Raqqa by recognizing them as *iskan başı* or chief of sedentarization. The *iskan başı*s were given authority to tax their own followers as well as to control other tribes in the region, but even this did not always prevent them from leaving their settlement areas and raiding towns and villages where they saw fit. With the increasing breakdown of central authority in the provinces the Millîs also began to attract the state's attention in a different manner. In 1758, *iskan başı* Mehmûd bin Keleş Evdo was accused of illegally entering the Khabur valley, confiscating grain supplies at Mağdal (just to the west of present-day al-Ḥaṣakah) and disarming and subjugating the local tribes. In addition to rebuilding an old castle on the Khabur, he purportedly intended to dam the river, establish a series of farms and villages and seize the entire area for the Millî confederation.²³ This attempt to set up an autonomous principality was quashed by the Ottomans, but it marked the beginning of the Millîs' political ascendancy in what is now north-eastern Syria. Mehmûd's son Tîmûr, whom the Ottomans recognized as *iskan başı* despite his constant transgressions in the Urfa area, effectively seized power in the province while the legitimate authorities were away on campaign in 1774; two years later the Porte had to supplicate him to assist the war effort against Karîm Ḥân Zand of Iran.²⁴ His capture and execution was still ordered repeatedly over the next two decades but Tîmûr now enjoyed the backing of a powerful new ally, the Mamluk governorate of Baghdad. In 1800 the Ottomans, marking the regression of their own power in the empire's periphery, formally appointed the Millî chieftain as vezir and governor of the province of Raqqa.²⁵

The Millîs and the End of Empire

Tîmûr Millî's career as an Ottoman was to be short and undistinguished. He did lend support to a punitive campaign led by the governor of Baghdad against

22 – Başbakanlık Archives: Şikayet Defteri 99:127; Ahkam-ı Cezayir ve Rakka 24:36, 40B, 68.

23 – Stefan Winter, "Die Kurden Syriens im Spiegel osmanischer Archivquellen (18. Jh.)", in Siamend Hajo et al., eds., *Syrien und die Kurden: Vom osmanischen Reich bis in die Gegenwart*, Münster, Unrast, 2007.

24 – Ahkam-ı Cezayir ve Rakka 24:210, 221, 229A-229B, 238; Mühimme Defteri 173:137-138, 283-284; 174:35; 175:138-140.

25 – Mühimme Defteri 178, passim; 213:29-30. See also Necdet Sakaoglu, *Anadolu Derebeyi Ocaklarından Köse Paşa Hanedanı*, Istanbul, Tarih Vakfı, 1998, p. 90-104.

tribes in the Ġazîrah in 1802, but he was also the object of numerous complaints of oppression and misgovernment back in Raqqa and Urfa. He was dismissed in 1803, returned to the Khabur district and immediately set about building a new coalition of tribes to help him regain office.²⁶ He died not long after, but it is oddly this final act of rebellion, rather than his family's long ascent to power in the first place, that became enshrined as the founding myth of the Millî confederation. Modern historians of Syria's tribes portray Tîmûr not as a parvenue *iskan başı* but as an Ottoman nobleman and career functionary who fled to Anatolia and constituted a vast principality of Kurdish and Arab tribes—the supposedly eponymous *Hezar Millet* or “thousand nations”—after his fall from grace.²⁷ In fact this myth, far from reflecting a genuine oral tradition, was that served the English traveler J.S. Buckingham on his visit with Tîmûr's son and successor Eyyûb Beg in 1816, and whose report was then cited in Stephen Longrigg's history of Iraq and subsequently in Mihemed Emîn Zekî's seminal two-volume “History of the Kurds and Kurdistan” in 1931.²⁸ In any event the Millî confederation stood to benefit more from the continuing disintegration of Ottoman imperial authority than as servitors of the state. In the first years of the 19th century the estimated 50,000 tents and 20,000 horsemen under Eyyûb's command formed the last bulwark against the even more powerful Wahhabi-allied ‘Anaza bedouin coming northward;²⁹ in 1818, the Ottoman authorities in central and southern Syria were in turn warning that the Millîs with their Berazî Kurd allies were taking over the steppe regions around Hama.³⁰

The invasion and occupation of Ottoman Syria by Ibrahim Paşa of Egypt in 1831 left the confederation literally caught between the waning empire and a vital new centralized state. At first Eyyûb Beg sided with the Egyptians, obsequiously pledging loyalty to Ibrahim and Mehmed Ali in return for his continued recognition as tribal lord, but he failed to win their trust and soon complained that the new administration was restricting his tribes from moving about their traditional summering grounds in Raqqa.³¹ A rift occurred within the Millî tribe

26 – Stephen Longrigg, *Four Centuries of Modern Iraq*, Oxford University Press, 1925, 211, 223; Sakaoğlu, *Anadolu Derebeyi*, 156-160.

27 – Aḥmad Waṣfî Zakariyyâ, *‘Aṣā’ir al-Šām*, Damascus, Dār al-Fîkr, 1997 (new ed.), p. 664; ‘Abd al-Ḥamid Muḥammad al-Ḥamd, *‘Aṣā’ir al-Raqqa wa ‘l-Ġazîrah: al-târiḥ wa ‘l-maw-rûf*, Raqqah, s.n., 2003, p. 419-420, 422-423. See also the fictionalized account of Tîmûr's life in Husayn Amîn, *Duriš ‘Avdi wa ‘udûl milli: riwāyah min al-turāṭ al-ša‘bi al-kurdi*, Beirut-Erbil, Kawa, 2004.

28 – J.S. Buckingham, *Travels in Mesopotamia*, London, Henry Colburn, 1827, p. 165-166; Longrigg, *Four Centuries*, p. 211-212; Muḥammad Amin Zakî, *Târiḥ al-Kurd wa Kurdistan min aqdam al-‘uṣûr al-târiḥiyyah hattâ al-ân*, translated from Kurdish by Muḥammad ‘Alî ‘Awnî, Beirut, Hûşang Kurdâġi, 1985, 1:219-220 (third imprint.).

29 – Buckingham, *Travels*, 2, 95-99, 111, 157-158; Câbi Ömer Efendi, *Câbi Târihi (Târiḥ-i Sultân Selîm-i Sâlis ve Mahmûd-i Sâni)*, ed. Mehmet Ali Beyhan, Ankara, Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2003, p. 589.

30 – Başbakanlık Archives: Hatt-ı Hümayun 24535; Cevdet Dahiliye 13964.

31 – Asad Rustum, *al-Mahfûzât al-malikiyyah al-miṣriyyah: bayân bi-waṭa’iq al-Šām*, 4. vol., Beirut, al-Maktabah al-Bûlisiyyah, 1986-7 (2nd imprint.), #1418-1419, 1771-1772, 2304-

itself after which Eyyûb again switched allegiances, lending his support to the Ottomans as they retook control of the Euphrates' east bank in 1834, only to fall victim, like the Bedirxans, to Mehmed Reşid Paşa's subsequent campaign to reduce the region's Kurdish emirates by force.³² During the Tanzimat reform period the Millîs' leaders were repeatedly harassed and imprisoned by the state authorities and saw many of their lands in the Ġazîrah seized by their old enemies among the Tayy and especially the Şammâr bedouin.³³ Details of the Millîs' history in this time are sketchy and often contradictory; their decline in number to only a few hundred tents, however, bears witness to the increasing efficacy of modern state control over the empire's rural and tribal periphery.

It was sultan Abdülhamid II's return to tribal clientelism as a basis for provincial administration that set the stage for the Millîs' resurgence and the consolidation of their presence in northern Syria. Eyyûb Beg's great-grandson İbrahîm, who succeeded to the chieftaincy in 1877, understood better than his predecessors (or contemporaries such as the Bedirxans) how to curry favour at the imperial palace while at the same time impressing the Europeans with his exemplary treatment of the region's Christian populations. The result was that the Millîs' time-honoured banditry was now not only winked at in Istanbul, but also earned İbrahîm "Paşa" the command over five Hamidiye regiments in south-east Anatolia. With some 6,000 of his own men issued with government arms, İbrahîm was able, through a combination of force and patronage, to completely subjugate the Kikî and Karakeçi Kurds and the Qays and Tayy Arabs and even to absorb parts of the traditionally hostile Şammâr into the Millî confederation. He could thus provide an unprecedented level of security for the region's lucrative caravan trade, while also averting his tribes' implication in the Armenian massacres at the end of the century. By 1901, western observers spoke admiringly of the "little empire" that İbrahîm Paşa administered from his fortress at Viranşehir and that stretched south all the way into the Ġabal 'Abd al-'Azîz massif.³⁴

The end came quickly for İbrahîm Paşa's empire, though, when the Young Turk revolution severed his privileged ties to Istanbul and he became a primary target of the newly restored progressivists' drive to reassert direct control over the eastern periphery. Already at the end of 1908, the confederation had effectively been dispersed and İbrahîm Paşa died while on flight from government troops near al-Ḥaşakah. The Millîs were harshly repressed by the CUP regime over the

2305, 2993, 3182.

32 – Rustum, *Mahfūzāt* #3640, 3729, 3979; Longrigg, *Four Centuries*, p. 286.

33 – Zākī, *Tārīḥ*, p. 222-223; cf. Kāmil al-Ġazzī, *Nahr al-dahab fī tāriḥ Ḥalab*, Aleppo, Dār al-'Ilm al-'Arabī, 1999 (2nd imprint.), p. 373-376.

34 – Mark Sykes, "A Report on Ibrahim Pasha, and the present state of Western Mesopotamia", Public Records Office: FO 424/208, p. 65-68 (reproduced in Klein); Sykes, "Kurdish Tribes;" M. Wiedemann, "Ibrahim Paschas Glück und Ende: Eine Episode aus den Kurdenkämpfen in Klein-Asien", *Asien* 8-3 (1908), p. 34-37; Bruinessen, *Agha Shaikh and State*, p. 187-189; Janet Klein, *Power in the Periphery: The Hamidiye Light Cavalry and the Struggle over Ottoman Kurdistan, 1890-1914* (unpublished Princeton University doctoral thesis, 2002), p. 195-213.

next years and played no significant role in World War I, though in 1919 they did earn the thanks of the Ottoman sultanate, one last time, for their stalwart defence of the Viranşehir region against the invading allied forces.³⁵ The new international boundary decided upon by the French and the Kemalist government at Ankara in October 1921 was to cut straight through this region, leaving a large chunk of the Millîs' ancestral lands within the mandated territory of Syria.

The Ġazîrah Revolt, 1937-1938

Given the nature of the sources available, it would be dangerous to ascribe the Millî Kurds or any other tribal grouping a single, clear-cut political position in the chaotic aftermath of the war. British diplomats in 1919 claimed the Millîs' support for a Kurdish-Armenian emirate under British mandate; French officials, predictably, portrayed them as early and ardent supporters of French rule in Syria.³⁶ The sons of İbrahim Paşa in fact appear to have endorsed a petition demanding full independence for the Arab nation which the tribal leaders of the Ġazîrah sent to the King-Crane commission in Damascus in March 1919, and over the next years the Millîs, much weakened as a result of the war, generally fell in behind the famous anti-French resistance leader Hâçim ("Hâchim" in local bedouin dialect) ibn Muhîd.³⁷ Many of their tribal chiefs spent the years 1922 to 1925 in Turkey, though mainly to look after their landholdings rather than to fight the Kemalists. In the end, Mehmûd Axa Millî had actually been one of several signatories against the Kurdish-Armenian emirate proposed by the British, partially perhaps because of the struggle that was ensuing with the Bedirxan family over leadership of the nascent national movement.³⁸ The Millîs also shunned contact with the Xwebûn committee as well as Dashnak, their ties with the Armenian community notwithstanding, and only lent nominal support to the Ağrı Dağ revolt. Mehmûd Axa, according to one of the revolt's principal architects, had been designated commander of operations in region four (around Viranşehir), but failed, despite repeated promises and assurances, to move eastward to assist the main rebel forces during the critical summer of 1930.³⁹ At the

35 – Aḥmad 'Uṭmān Abū Bakr, *Kurdistān fi 'ahd al-salām (ba' d al-ḥarb al-ġalamiyyah al-ūlā)*, Bonn, Kawa, 2002, p. 191, 194.

36 – Abū Bakr, *Kurdistān*, p. 242; Pierre Rondot, "Les Kurdes de Syrie", *France Méditerranéenne et Africaine*, 4-1 (1939), 104; Christian Velud, *Une expérience d'administration régionale en Syrie durant le mandat français: conquête, colonisation et mise en valeur de la Ġazîra, 1920-1936* (unpublished Université de Lyon II doctoral dissertation, 1991), p. 59-60, 83, 110, 219.

37 – Šāliḥ Hawwāš al-Maslaṭ, *Šafahāt mansiyyah min niḍāl al-Ġazîrah al-Sūriyyah*, Damascus, Dār 'Alā' al-Dîn, 2001, p. 48, 86, 89.

38 – Abū Bakr, *Kurdistān*, p. 97, 144. See also Vahé Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie et en Haute-Mésopotamie: Aux confins de la Turquie, de la Syrie et de l'Irak (1919-1933)*, Paris, Karthala, 2004, p. 337.

39 – Zinār Silūpî (Kadri Cemil Paşa), *Fi sabil Kurdistān (Mudakkirāt)*, translated by R. 'Alî, Vällingby, Sweden, Kawa; Beirut, Dār al-Kātib, 1987, p. 155. Cf. Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie*,

same time, as we have noted, Millî tribesmen in the Ḥayy al-Akrād were actively engaged in anti-French activities there. Insofar as the military option for recapturing Kurdish territory inside Turkey had been all but exhausted by 1930, the Millîs in general avoided implication in the Bedirxan-led cultural and political initiatives with their internationalist orientation and instead concentrated on rebuilding their traditional position inside Syria.

While the larger part of the Millî tribe eventually settled on the Syrian side of the border at Ra's al-ʿAyn, it is paradoxically the re-founding of the city of Raqqa by the French authorities that really cemented the Millîs' role within republican Syrian society. Owing to their long presence in the region and especially their close association with several of the most prominent local bedouin groups, the Millîs emerged as one of the leading notable families of the city. Indeed they continue to wield influence in city politics today, even though (or rather, precisely because) they have been integrated to the point of no longer being considered ethnically distinct from the rest of the city's still largely tribal population.⁴⁰ In the town of Qāmišlî too, which the French built in 1926 to accommodate refugees from Turkey but which incorporated farmlands owned by the Millîs, they enjoy a certain prominence to the present day.⁴¹

This ambivalence of identity found early expression, or was perhaps even forged, in the separatist revolt that shook the Ġazīrah in 1937-1938. The revolt was precipitated by France's projected recognition of an independent Syrian national government, and it brought together the Ġazīrah's Christian community and Kurdish chieftains such as Hajo Axa, for the most part recent arrivals from Turkey, in a call for regional autonomy under continuing French (or even Turkish!) protection.⁴² The revolt was initially endorsed by Mehmûd Axa as well,⁴³ but Millî support quickly evaporated after Christian leaders stepped up their agitation against the Damascus government and French forces bombed Kurdish villages in response to riots in Qāmišlî. Again it is difficult to ascertain today how actively individual Millî tribe members were engaged in the conflict and when, but by late 1938 the revolt had become purely an affair of the Christian popula-

p. 384-386. The Millîs' failure to support the Ararat revolt is corroborated by Turkish officials, who claimed that Millî and other Kurdish leaders inside Turkey were in fact collaborating with the government. See *al-Ahrār*, 21 August 1930, reproduced in Konê Reş, *Ġam' iyyat Huybûn 1927 wa waqā' i' tawrat Ararāt 1930*, Irbil, Mu'assasat Mükriyānî, 1998, p. 173.

40 – Sūniyā Farrā and Luc Deheuvels, *Al-Raqqa wa ab'ādubā al-iġtimā' iyyah*, trans. ʿAbd al-Rahmān Ḥamīdah, Damascus, Culture Ministry, 1982, p. 33-35, 71; Myriam Ababsa, "Mise en valeur agricole et contrôle politique de la Vallée de l'Euphrate (1865-1946): Étude des relations État, nomades et citadins dans le caza de Raqqa", *Bulletin d'Études Orientales* 53-54 (2002), p. 465-466; al-Ḥamd, *ʿAšā' ir*, passim.

41 – Konê Reş, *Kitāb al-Qāmišlî: Madinat al-mahabbah wa ʿl-taʿāwun wa ʿl-iḥāʾ*, Aleppo, Markaz al-Inmāʾ al-Ḥadārî, 2004, p. 54-55.

42 – See Stephen Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate*, London, etc.: Oxford University Press, 1958, p. 247-251; Philip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism 1920-1945*, Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 525-534.

43 – Zakariyyā, *ʿAšā' ir al-Šām*, p. 663-664.

tion seeking French guarantees against Muslim majority rule. As a group the Millîs soon rallied to the National Bloc government and its local representatives in Raqqa and other parts of the Ġazîrah;⁴⁴ unlike the Heverkans or the Bedirxans, the Millîs, Berazîs and other Kurdish communities long established on Syrian territory would also provide several key figures of national government and the military in independent Syria in the 1940's and 1950's.

Conclusion

The struggle for Kurdish self-determination and identity in Syria after WWI was multifarious. On the one hand, Syria served, under French auspices, as the centre for an intellectual movement that decisively influenced Kurdish culture far beyond its borders and that established its authors as the leaders in exile of an international effort to attain independent statehood. On the other hand, the rescue, or the construction, of a Kurdish civil identity from the wreck of the Ottoman Empire in Syria was equally the work of a rural population that had long been associated with Arab (and Christian) elements in the region, that opposed French imperial designs in the name of private, parochial or local interests, and that became fully integrated into, but not wholly assimilated by, the modern Syrian state. This difference of approach was not a mere function of kinship ties. Members of the traditionally refractory Millî confederation actively supported French policies in the Ġazîrah when this met their purpose; by the same token, as we have seen, lesser-known members of the Bedirxan family represented the CUP or National Bloc regimes in Syria all the while preserving their Kurdish distinctiveness.

If nothing else, this diversity of experience suggests the need to better understand the historic backgrounds of Syria's Kurdish communities. Ottoman administrative documents in particular can provide an important corrective to local and tribal oral histories, where what passes for the authentic account of a lineage's past has often been gleaned from older European travel reports, and many of the putatively autonomous tribal elites were in fact Ottoman government creations. The difficult transition from tribal chieftaincy to foreign tutelage to political emancipation has of course been characteristic not only of the Kurds, but of modern state formation in the Middle East in general. Bearing in mind the continued denial of the basic rights of citizenship to a significant proportion of the Ġazîrah's Kurdish population in Syria since 1962, it merits repeating⁴⁵ that not only the Kurdish presence, but indeed the very constitution of Kurdish nationalism in its various forms is an intimate part of Syria's history.

44 – al-Maslat, *Şafahât mansiyyah*, p. 193, 229-233.

45 – *Al-Jazeera*, interview with President Baššār al-Asad, 1 May 2004.

Leaders of the Millî Kurd Confederation in Syria

