Kurds in Dark Times

New Perspectives on Violence and Resistance

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"Land of the Kurds" or "Land of the Rocks"?

Changing Perceptions of Kurdistan in Ottoman and European Sources

Metin Atmaca

Although the scholarship on Kurdish history discusses the boundaries of Kurdistan either in terms of its geographical limits or as a political frontier, it remains silent about the issue of the origins and transformation of Kurdistan over time. I argue here that throughout the centuries the boundaries and the core of Kurdistan changed dramatically, as did the name itself. I demonstrate this change through European and Ottoman[1] historical and literary sources. What I present here is a socially and historically constructed "political geography" that focuses on the changing perception of Kurdistan, including its boundaries, geographical features, urban centers, and inhabitants. I specifically employ historical maps and accounts, which provide sometimes vague yet oftentimes more specific descriptions of the Kurdish frontiers. My primary sources are the historical accounts of local geographers, statesmen, literary persons, and Kurdish emirs; I bring in other primary and secondary sources when necessary.

This chapter is a revised and expanded version of Metin Atmaca, "Change and Continuity in the Perception of the Kurdish Lands in European and Ottoman Sources," *Journal of Mesopotamian Studies* 3 (2018): 77–93.

1. I employ the name "Ottoman" rather than "Turk" because the Ottoman Empire consisted of many local ethnic groups in addition to the Kurds.

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Before I turn to the political geography of Kurds in history, it is necessary to analyze how the Ottoman Empire, which bordered and contained the Kurds for centuries, perceived its own imperial boundaries: the Ottomans positioned their identities in relation to the Iranians (Acem) on the one side and the Europeans (Frenk) on the other. Adopting the Roman imaginary that they inherited through the Byzantine Empire, the Ottomans thus expanded this perception to portray themselves as Rum or Romans, especially in comparison with the images and portrayals of Iranians in literature, politics, and geography (Kafadar 2007, 2017). During times of conflict, however, the gentilics Rumi and Acem were paired together and used in binary opposition, often in poetry as well as in texts on religion and politics. Consequently, in the early Ottoman mindset there emerged two separate yet bordered worlds that were positioned not only geographically but also culturally. Yet a close reading of contemporaneous sources reveals that there was no agreement in relation to the exact geographical boundaries of these two worlds. This problem was compounded by the historical fact that most of the land between the Ottomans (Rum) and the Safavids (Acem) was populated primarily by the Kurds as well as by other ethnic and religious groups. Because of the discrepancy and subsequent ambiguity regarding the geographic frontier between these two powerful states, referred to literally as *serhadd* (frontier, borderland) by both the Ottomans and Iranians, this area remained terrae incognitae, "unknown lands," from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. Hence, the imaginary of Kurdistan was historically mired due to its location on the borders of two powerful empires; this started to change only in the nineteenth century upon the redefinition of space and meaning with the arrival of modernity to the region.

Predicated on this historical context, this chapter comprises three parts. The first part discusses the depiction of Kurdish lands in medieval sources before the arrival of the Ottoman into the region. The second part, which is the most extensive, delineates the portrayal of Kurdish lands in Ottoman sources. The third part articulates the transformations in the spatial meaning of Kurdistan that occurred after the mid–eighteenth century when both Ottoman and European sources defined the core of

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Kurdistan as "Silêmanî" (Ar. as-Sulaymaniyyah, Tr. Süleymaniye) or "Baban Sancak," as it was referred to in nineteenth-century literature.

Kurdish Lands in Medieval Times

Arabic medieval sources from the tenth to the twelfth centuries use three classifications as toponyms (place-names) for the lands the Kurds inhabited. One referred to them as "Bilad al-Akrad" (Land of the Kurds), where there were no precise boundaries or ethnic homogeneity implied, except by some scholars such as Imad al-din al-Isfahani, who specifically referred to the lands around Hasankeyf (1955, 421). The second classification was as "Zuzan al-Akrad" (Summer Pastures of the Kurds), located around Jazirat Ibn ʿUmar (Cizre), thereby combining two local ethnic groups, the Kurds and the Armenians, that claimed these regions as their ancestral lands. The third was "Jibal al-Akrad" (Mountains of the Kurds), where the land referred specifically to the mountainous space among Dinawar, Qazvin, Suhraward, and Hamadan.

The name "Kordestan" was first used around 1153, when Sanjar, the leader of the Seljuqid Empire (which preceded the Ottoman one) transformed the territory around Dinawar, Hamadan, Kermanshah, and Sinna into the administrative province of Kordestan, which stands for "the Land or Province of the Kurds" in Persian (James 2007).[2] As the Kurds moved farther west and north, the region denoting Kordestan also expanded, now including the lands around Lake Van. It should be noted, however, that alongside Kurds other ethnic and religious groups, specifically Armenians, Syriacs, and Arabs, also lived in these territories. Specifically, the Kurds were the majority only in Jibal al-Akrad, not in Zuzan al-Akrad or Bilad al-Akrad, during this period. If this was the case, why did Arab geographers name these regions after the Kurds rather than the Armenians or Syriacs? Some scholars suggest that religion played a significant

2. The medieval Arab sources referring to the Kurds and their land include Yahya Ibn Fadlallah al-ʿUmari (1988), Ibn Hawqal (1939), Ibn al-Athir (1998), Yaqut al-Hamawi (1957), and Ibn Khallikan (1968–72).

role. Kurds were Muslims who were active in defending the region first against the Christian Armenians and then against the shamanic Oğuz Turks and the Mongols. As a consequence, Arab scholars revealed in their choice of place-name their ideological desire to have this region transformed into an exclusively Muslim Kurdish political space (James 2014).

Even though more historical sources are available from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the number of references in them to Kurds and Kurdistan declines. One exception is the fourteenth-century geographical source *Masalik al-absar fi mamalik al-amsar* (The Ways of Discernment into the Realms of the Capital Cities) by Ibn Fadlallah al-'Umari (1988, 3:124–35), who discusses "the Land of the Kurds" as the area between Hamadan and Cilicia. Hence, during this period this source locates the Kurds geographically as the inhabitants living mostly on the lands between western Iran and northern Iraq. In the fifteenth century, the use takes on an administrative meaning as regional conflict escalates. For instance, Nizam al-Din Shami's literary source *Zafarnama* (Book of Victory [Nizamüddin Şâmi 1987]) on Tamerlane's military campaigns in Anatolia and Iran refers to Kurdistan in both geographical and administrative terms. Geographically, the name "Kurdistan" alluded to the same exact geographical location between Hamadan and Cilicia as given in the fourteenth-century source. Tamerlane administratively granted this land to a certain emir as the "province of Kurdistan," which geographically covered the more northerly regions of Bitlis, Muş, Ahlat, and Van in eastern Anatolia (Nizamüddin Şâmi 1987, 125, 158, 332).[3] In the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, even Çemizgezek near central Anatolia was considered a part of Kurdistan (Chèref-ou'ddine 1873, 3; Scheref 1860, 163).

During the early sixteenth century, İdris-i Bidlisi (d. 1520), who was the architect of the political deal between the Kurdish emirs and the Ottoman Empire, referred to Bitlis as the "center of the government of Kurdistan." Yet the population at this administrative center was mainly non-Muslim and mostly Armenian. Baki Tezcan suggests that these regions were

3. Shami mentions Kurdistan in various places with reference to "emirs," "*vilayet*" (province), and "*derbend*" (passage) as well as to several other locations. One should note that Diyarbekir is mentioned here separately (Nizamüddin Şâmi 1987, 332).

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named "Kurdistan" owing to the distribution of local power structure rather than to population composition because the Kurds administratively and politically ruled over the Armenians (2000, 542). Hence, the Kurdish emirs had already seized political power in the region before the arrival of the Ottomans in the region, with support from the local Muslim Seljuqid, Timurid, Aq Quyunlu, and Qara Quyunlu dynasties. Thus, it is especially important to note that unlike what the Turkish national historiography often claims, the concept of Kurdistan existed politically and geographically before the arrival of the Ottomans in the region.

Kurdish Lands in Ottoman Sources

The arrival of the Ottomans in the region locally led to an inherent tension with the other large empire, the Iranian Safavids, as for centuries both vied for power in what was to become the border between the two empires. The Kurdish emir İdris-i Bidlisi collaborated and developed local strategies with the Ottoman sultan Selim I (r. 1508–20) to impede the rise and expansion of the Iranian Safavid ruler Ismail I (r. 1501–24). Before setting on a military campaign against the Safavids, Selim specifically commissioned İdris-i Bidlisi to win over the local Kurdish emirs and beys and incorporate them into the Ottoman camp. It appears that Selim based his decision on detailed knowledge of the Kurdish lands; for years, agents of the sultan either living at or traveling through the empire's eastern frontier and Kurdistan carried over to Istanbul the local intelligence they gathered (Dehqan and Genç 2018, 205–6, 209–10). In line with the received intelligence, Selim I then placed his confidence in İdris-i Bidlisi, incorporating several Kurdish tribes into his army in the process.

Although Ottoman sources offer detailed information on these tribes, Safavid sources make only a few references, cursorily referring to them all as "Kurds" (Yamaguchi 2012, 111). In addition, the Iranians stereotyped the Kurds as "evil-natured, stubborn, morose and treacherous" (Matthee 2003, 167, citing Kaempfer 1977, 88, and Isfahani 1372/1993, 39, 77, 83). The difference between the Ottoman and Safavid dynasties' approach and perception of Kurds is due to the strategic importance of Kurdistan for the Ottomans. After all, during the sixteenth century, when the Safavid threat

was at its height, the Ottomans maintained their interest in the Kurdish regions, collecting local information. Even after the incorporation of the Kurdish emirates into the empire during the same century, the Ottomans continued to diversify their regional policy toward each emirate, altering the local administrative rule based on the characteristics of each emirate. They classified the centers of Kurdish *eyalet*s (province) and towns such as Diyarbekir, Bitlis, Van, Muş, Mardin, and the like near the eastern frontier as *yurtluk* (family estates), *ocaklık* (hereditary autonomous appanage or ancestral lands), or, more commonly, *yurtluk-ocaklık*, turning them into *timars* (fiefdoms) with some tax obligations. The Ottomans categorized the Kurdish emirates that were close to the Safavid territories, such as Hakkari, Behdinan, Baban, Botan, and Soran, into *hükûmets* (local governments with a high degree of autonomy) with no financial obligations. This Ottoman administrative division was very significant in terms of how these two zones of Kurdistan developed differently through time. The Kurdish lands turned into *timars* were literally included in the classical Ottoman land system, thereby becoming incorporated into the Ottoman body politic. In contrast, the Kurdish lands that became *hükûmets* remained autonomous, apart from the Ottoman land system and considered more like "buffer zones;" these lands were also strategically more vulnerable, frequently changing hands between the Ottomans and the Safavids either by force or by will.[4]

It is also significant to note that the Ottomans considered and treated their eastern Iranian (Muslim) frontier differently from their western European (Christian) frontier. They did not employ the ideology of *gaza* (holy war, fought by *gazi*s, holy warriors) when waging war on the Safavids. Nevertheless, the Safavids belonged to a different religious sect in Islam; they were Shi'i, whereas the Ottomans were Sunni. As a consequence, the Ottomans justified their war with the Safavids by a *fetva* (judicial opinion) granted by their *şeyhülislam* (the mufti of Istanbul and head of

4. The historiography on the Kurdish emirates tends to generalize the assumption of them as a "buffer zone," whereas mostly only the emirates on the frontier were seen as such, such as those with the status of *hükûmet*. For further discussion of Kurdistan's status as a "buffer zone," see Ateş 2013, 39; Fuccaro 2011; and O'Shea 2012, 71–72.

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the Ottoman religious-legal hierarchy). For instance, the contemporaneous judicial opinions from the Ottoman *şeyhülislam*s Sarıgörez (d. 1522), Kemalpaşazade (d. 1534), and Ebussuud (d. 1574) declared Safavids and their Kızılbaş (Shi'i) supporters in Anatolia to be apostates, unbelievers, heretics, rebels, and brigands whose elimination by the Ottoman army was a religious duty (Atçıl 2017, 300–308). Such an adverse religious stand toward the Shi'i residing in Anatolia eventually led to the marginalization and oppression of this group under Ottoman rule.

After winning several wars against the Safavids in the sixteenth century, the Ottomans felt stronger and more militarily secure, leading them to become more lenient toward the Kurdish emirs as well. In 1521, a year after the Ottoman sultan Süleyman I (r. 1520–66) ascended the throne, he classified twenty-eight administrative units in Kurdistan as *cema'at-i Kürdân* (Kurdish communities), bestowing upon them the right to rule their own lands (Barkan 1953–54, 306–7). Sultan Süleyman even praised God for placing Kurdistan between the two Muslim dynasties, stating that "God made Kurdistan act in the protection of my imperial kingdom like a strong barrier and an iron fortress against the sedition of the demon Gog of Persia" (quoted in Aziz Efendi 1985, 14). In addition to being considered a buffer zone between the Ottoman and Safavid Empires extending over hundreds of miles, Kurdistan also acquired the imaginary of a strong "wall" and "fortress" that clearly marked the frontier between them.

The Kurdish administrative units in the Ottoman Empire did not always remain the same, however, and were transformed upon the accession of each Ottoman sultan, as did all the laws governing the land. Although succeeding sultans often rubberstamped the rulings of their predecessors, the *ferman* (imperial decree) renewing the status of the Kurdish emirates underwent specific changes literally in line with the current state of Ottoman political relations with the Safavids. Internal politics among the Kurdish emirs themselves also affected the current state of the Ottoman administrative units, especially when there were power struggles among the Kurdish ruling families. In the early seventeenth century, for instance, Ottoman official Ayn Ali presented a slightly different administrative structure of the Kurdish emirates, wherein their privileges were placed under the control of provincial administrations. To the province

of Diyarbekir, which comprised eleven *sancak*s (banners or districts, an administrative subdivision of the *eyalet*) and five *hükûmet*s, the Ottoman officials created and added another eight districts of Kurdish beys (*ekrâd begi sancağı*) that also had tax obligations (Ayn Ali 1280/1863–64, 29–31). It is interesting to note the transformation in the Ottoman official perception of Kurds. Although the Kurds were initially viewed as a *cema'at* (community) at the beginning of their incorporation into the Ottoman body politic, this depiction changed almost a century later from being based on community to one predicated on Kurdish beys or leaders. Once the Kurds in Kurdistan were not viewed as a community, their co-optation into the Ottoman imperial structure as subjects became easier to achieve. Also, identifying the Kurds through their leaders alone eventually made it easier for Ottomans to remove them from power.[5]

Before the end of the sixteenth century, Şeref Xân (d. 1601), the Kurdish emir of Bitlis, decided to write in Persian, the literary language then used in the lands extending from India to Anatolia, an account of the history of the Kurdish dynasties and ruling families, which he titled *Şerefnâme* (Book of Honor, 1597). Because Şeref Xân intended his audience to comprise Ottoman and Kurdish rulers, his account contained a distinctly pro-Ottoman and Sunni bias.[6] In terms of his career on the ground, Şeref Xân's political life was also tremendously influenced by the Ottoman–Safavid rivalry, like the career of his father, Şemseddîn Beg (d. 1576), before him.

Şerefnâme traces the historical origins of Kurdish emirs to several regional dynasties, including the Ayyubids, the Abbasids, and the Umayyads, as well as to pre-Islamic rulers such as the Sassanid shahs and the Macedonian leader Alexander the Great. In the introduction, Şeref Xân also discusses several mythologies regarding Kurdish roots. In one myth, Kurds are traced to those people who ran away from the persecution of an Iranian king named Dahhak, taking refuge in the mountains. In another, the Kurds descend from a group of supernatural *cîns* (genies or

5. For more information on the Ottoman polity's incorporation of the Kurdish emirates, see Atmaca 2021.

6. This is the case especially with the text of the Ms. Dorn 306, located in the National Library of Russia (Alsancakli 2015, 139).

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demons) that God then turned into human beings. A third myth states that the Kurds emerged from the marriage between a human and a giant. Description of some of the Kurds' typical characteristics ensues. They are extremely courageous and fearless yet also very argumentative in deciding who should be their leader. Also, they are good in the Islamic sciences but lack the literary talent for calligraphy and poetry (Scheref 1860, 1, 12–19).

In addition to his discussion of the origins of the Kurds, Şeref Xân also provided the geographic location of Kurdistan. According to him, the boundaries of Kurdistan started from Basra on the Persian Gulf and extended to Malatya and Maraş in central Anatolia, and it was surrounded by Persia (Fars), Iraq-i Ajam, Azerbaijan, and Armenia to the north and by Iraq-i Arab, Diyarbekir, and Mosul to the south. He concluded that no king had ever tried to occupy Kurdistan because of both the brave and querulous nature of the Kurds and their mountainous geography. Instead, such rulers symbolically pretended to be the overlords of the Kurds, treating the latter as suzerains who sent the rulers some "gifts" to demonstrate their loyalty, especially during military expeditions (Scheref 1860, 1, 12–19).

Kurds Caught between the Ottoman and Iranian Empires

Although Şeref Xân defined the boundaries of Kurdistan much more precisely than others did, the ambiguous terrae incognitae extended between Mosul and Aleppo on the one side and farther up northwest to Malatya on the other. Cemal Kafadar discusses the reason for this land ambiguity, stating that it was a "grey area or zone of transition where Turcoman tribes mixed freely with Arab and Kurdish tribes of northern Mesopotamia" (2007, 17). Hence, the boundaries between Turkish, Iranian, and Arab lands were fluid in practice because most of these boundaries were not only dominated by the Kurds but also contained Turcomans as well as non-Muslim groups such as the Armenians, Assyrians, Jews, and Chaldeans.

Several contemporaneous sources support these fluid boundaries. For instance, Fuzuli (d. 1556), a well-known poet of Ottoman and Azeri Turkish literature from Kirkuk, agreed with this portrayal as he imagined the vague boundary between "Baghdad and Rum" (or Arabs and Turks) as being somewhere between southeastern Anatolia and northern Iraq

(Kafadar 2007, 17). Yet Melayê Cizîrî (d. 1640), a well-known Kurdish poet and mystic, included Van and its surrounding region in the east within Kurdistan and then compared Kurdistan to Shiraz, Tabriz, Khorasan, and Isfahan (Shakely 1996, 245). He stated the following in a couplet:

> Not only Kurdistan, but also Shiraz, Jeng and Van give tax
> They happily pay their toll, and so [does] Isfahan. (Melayê Cizîrî 2012, 72)[7]

It is interesting to note that Cizîrî's perception of the boundaries of the Ottoman and Safavid Empires was shaped not by geographical markers but rather through particular political symbols, cultural differences, and characteristics. Cizîrî specifically built his perception of Kurdistan on the work of Yaqut al-Hamawi (d. 1229), a thirteenth-century Arab biographer and geographer. In his encyclopedic work on the Muslim world, *Mu'jam al-buldan* (Dictionary of Countries) (1957), al-Hamawi made many references to the Kurdish lands. He frequently referred to Mesopotamia and northwestern Iran as the land of the Kurds, classifying it as the *iqlim al-rabi'* (the fourth region). Both Cizîrî and the later seventeenth-century Kurdish poet Ehmedê Xanî (d. 1707) praised the Kurdish notables as rulers of this "fourth region." In couplets, Xanî places Kurdistan in the middle of the lands of the Rum, Acem, Arabs, and Georgians:

> Each lord of them is Hatam-like in munificence
> Each man of them is Rostam-like in combat
>
> Seen from the Arabs to Georgians
> The Kurdish lands have become like towers
>
> Those Turks and Iranians are surrounded by them
> The Kurds are scattered in all four corners

7. The original version of the couplet in Kurdish:
Tenha ne Kurdistan didin Şîraz û Yeng û Wan didin
Her yek li ser çavan didin hem ji Espehan têtin xerac.

On both sides the Kurdish tribes
Have become targets for the arrows of calamity. (Ehmedê Xanî 2010, 21)[8]

What is noteworthy in these couplets is the portrayal of the current position of the Kurds, caught between the Turks and the Iranians as dangerous targets coveted by both rival empires. Kurds cannot reach a solution that will remove them from this calamity because they are not united but occupied and divided among these groups. Indeed, in some other couplets, Xanî compares the Kurds with the surrounding ethnic groups that have built empires—namely, the Turks and Iranians; he explains why the Kurds could not become the Turks and Iranians' leader:

Had we set our unity
Had we relied on each other

The Turks, Arabs, and Iranians entirely
Would all be but serving us

We would have perfected the religion and state
We would have attained the sciences and wisdom. (Ehmedê Xanî 2010, 21–22)[9]

8. Here is the original of the couplets in Kurdish by Xanî:
Her mîrekî wan bi bezlê Hatem
Her mêrekî wan bi rezmê Ristem
Bi'fkir ji Erab heta ve Gurcan
Kurmancîye bûye şibhê bircan
Ev Rûm û Ecem bi wan hesar in
Kurmanc hemî li çar kenar in
Herdu terefan qebîlê Kurmanc
Bo tîrê qeza kirine amanc.
9. The original is as follows:
Ger dê hebûya me ittifaqek
Vêk ra bikira me inqiyadek
Rûm û Ereb û Ecem temamî
Hemiyan ji me ra dikir xulamî

Indeed, the Kurds' incapacity to unite starts to emerge as a significant theme as the other groups around them are able to coalesce into large empires that then start to oppress the Kurds to contain them.

Changing Relations: Ottomans and Kurds in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

The ambiguity surrounding the borders and boundaries of Kurdish lands continued as late as the mid–nineteenth century. Then in 1847 with the Second Treaty of Erzurum, the Ottoman and Iranian Empires as well as the United Kingdom and Russia came together to attempt to negotiate the boundary disputes between the two empires; they did so "to produce a definitive and binding settlement of their territorial dispute and to narrow the frontier zone into a mappable line" (Schofield 2008, 152). To prove their claims to certain territories—particularly to the cities of Muhammarah (today's Khorramshahr), Zohab, and Silêmanî—the Iranian and Ottoman officials resorted to old *fermans*, maps and travel accounts, such as Katib Çelebi's (d. 1657) seventeenth-century geographical account *Cihannüma* (Mirror of the World) (Aykun 1995, 117–18). Since Katib Çelebi's account bore the seal of the Ottoman sultan, Iranian delegates utilized it as evidence to claim sovereignty over the districts of Ahiska, Van, Kars, and Bayezid, also demanding the recognition of their rights over the district of Silêmanî (Ateş 2013, 97). In addition to Katib Çelebi's account, the Ottoman delegates presented copies of *Düstur'ul inşa* (Principals of Writing), which contained many documents from the previous correspondence and treaties collected by the Ottoman *reisü'l-küttâb* (chancery of the Imperial Divan, later secretary of state or chancellor) Sarı Abdullah Efendi in 1643. Also employed by the Ottoman side was the Ottoman official chronicler Mustafa Naima Efendi's *Tarih-i naima* (Naima's History) as well as Feraizi-zade's *Gülşen-i maarif* (Rose Garden of Wisdom), which were presented to the delegates in Erzurum as evidence that Silêmanî had

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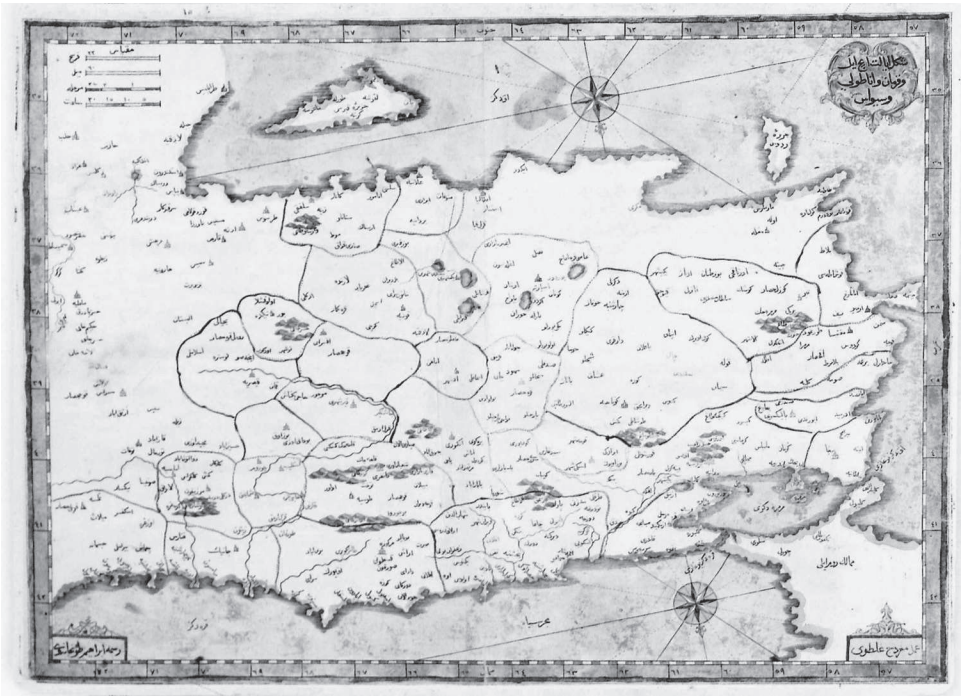
Tekmîl dikir me dîn û dewlet
Tehsîl dikir me 'ilm û hikmet



1.1. A reversed map of Anatolia produced by Ibrahim Müteferrika for Katib Çelebi's *Cihannüma*. From Kâtib Çelebi 1145/1732.

been a part of the Ottoman Empire for centuries (Aykun 1995, 118). It is interesting that Katib Çelebi's *Cihannüma* was used not only by the Ottomans and Iranians as testimony for their claims on territories but also widely by European scholars.[10]

10. Joseph von Hammer, an Austrian Orientalist of the nineteenth century, used Katib Çelebi's account extensively. In fact, before completing his ten-volume encyclopedia on Ottoman history in the 1830s, von Hammer translated *Cihannüma*'s sections on the Balkan regions of the Ottoman Empire (Katib Çelebi 1812). European historians and geographers later used Katib Çelebi's maps extensively until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the French and British diplomats, travelers, and cartographers visiting the region produced their own. However, the British and French maps continued to remain less detailed than Çelebi's own earlier versions. Although *Cihannüma* presented a mid-seventeenth-century account, its impact continued until much

Despite the level of detail in his work in the middle of the seventeenth century, Katib Çelebi does not label Kurdistan on any of his maps in their original copies but instead lists the region predominantly populated by Kurds and Armenians as "unknown territory," perhaps as a "no man's land."[11] However, the extensive detailed narration of the region in his text reveals that he does not intentionally silence the geographical location of Kurdistan. After describing several Kurd-populated areas such as Van, Adilcevaz, Bitlis, Muş, Erzurum, Hakkari, Mosul, Siirt, Diyarbekir, and a few other places in the eastern Ottoman Empire, Katib Çelebi undertakes an extensive discussion of Kurdistan. He first briefly describes the origins of the Kurds to convey the contemporaneous speculations about whether Kurds were actually Arabs. He then expands the boundaries of his Kurd-populated lands to Maraş and Malatya, concluding that the Kurdish lands were made up of eighteen Ottoman *vilayet*s (Katib Çelebi 2007, 448–50).[12] In Katib Çelebi's account, the core of Kurdistan emerges as Cizre because it is the place he treats as the most significant Kurdish town.

Around the same period that Katib Çelebi completed his magnum opus *Cihannüma*, Evliya Çelebi (d. 1684) also traveled through Diyarbekir, Mardin, Bitlis, Van, and some nearby cities that he referred to in sum as "Kurdistan." In comparison to Katib Çelebi, Evliya Çelebi is much more specific in outlining the Kurdish lands. He refers to Diyarbekir and all immediate surrounding lands as "the province of Diyarbekir of Kurdistan" ("eyalet-i Diyarbekr-i Kürdistan") (Evliya Çelebi 2005, 199a). Evliya

later, shaping much of the geographical perception of Ottoman lands in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Sezgin 2013).

11. Referring to Paul Wittek's characterization of early Ottoman western Anatolia, Nelida Fuccaro suggests that the Ottomans rendered rural Kurdistan a "no-man's land" or a zone of "cultural barbarism" (2011, 239). This might have been true in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the Ottomans put Kurdistan into oblivion, but it was not the case in the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries (Atmaca 2021, 51–57, 63–69).

12. After making some generalizations on the character of the Kurds, Katib Çelebi emphasizes that they are "Şafi'i" and "ehl-i Sünnet" (followers of the normative practice of the Prophet and his companions).

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also employs the phrase "province of Kurdistan" (*eyalet-i Kürdistan*) when he specifically refers to Diyarbekir; he then uses the phrase "the land of Kurdistan" (*diyar-ı Kürdistan*) when referring to a much broader region extending as far as northern Iraq and northwestern Iran (Evliya Çelebi 2005, 217b). He includes the cities of Van (Kürdistan-ı Van), Soran (east and north of Erbil), and Bitlis in Kurdistan as well. It is also at this juncture that he differentiates the Kurdistan region within Safavid lands as "Kurdistan of Iran" (Kürdistan-ı Acemistan) (2005, 326b).

Specifically, Evliya describes what he believes are the broader geographical boundaries of Kurdistan:

> Named Kurdistan and land of rocks [*sengistan*], this is a great land, which includes seventy different settlements. One corner of it starts from the northern side of the land of Erzurum and Van to the land of Hakkari, Cizre, İmadiyye, Mosul, Şehrizul, Harir, Ardalan, Baghdad, Derne, Derteng, and Basra. Located in between Iraq and Anatolia [Irâk-ı Arab- ile Âl-i Osmân-mâbeyninde] six thousand Kurdish tribes and clans dwell on these highlands, where the nation of Acem would easily capture the Ottoman lands [Diyar-ı Rum] if they [the Kurds] had not become a stronghold [*sedd-i sedid*]. (2005, 219a)[13]

Evliya then ends his account by praying for the land to stay in between these two states forever.[14] Although he also notes that the majority of the Kurds belong to the Şafi'i school of law,[15] he nevertheless considers the Kurds as part of the Sunnis of the Ottoman Empire in practice. Yet Evliya captures the religious complexity of this area well when he refers to the unorthodox elements in Kurdistan, such as the mystics, gnostics, and miracle workers as well as the dervish lodges, shrines, and pilgrimage sites. In addition to these heterodox Sufi elements, Evliya also mentions

13. Fuccaro asserts that in using the term *sengistan*, Evliya referred to the "barbarian" character of Kurdistan (2011, 239).

14. "İnkırâzu'd-devrân Âl-i Osmân ile şâh-ı Acem mâbeyninde memâlik-i Kürdistân mü'ebbed ola, âmîn, yâ Mu'în" (Evliya Çelebi 2005, 200a).

15. "Kürdistân olup cümle halkı Şâfi'îyyü'l-mezheb olmağile Şâfi'î müftîsi iştihardadır" (Evliya Çelebi 2005, 200a).

the "heretical" group the Yezidis[16] as part of the heterodox culture of Kurdistan.

Evliya also divides Kurdistan into its rural and urban components. While portraying rural Kurdistan as "the land of rocks," he depicts Bitlis and Diyarbekir as "havens of culture and civilization in contrast to their surroundings" (Fuccaro 2011, 245). According to Evliya, Bitlis has lush gardens, fountains, and public baths. Its cultured and multitalented ruler is like an Ottoman "renaissance" prince, and its notables own luxurious items such as sable furs (2005, 225b; see also Dankoff 2004, 76–77).

Almost half a century after Evliya penned his travelogue, Mustafa Naima (d. 1716), an Ottoman court chronicler, keeps referring to Kurdish lands as such. In one account, Naima mentions a Naqshbandi sheikh who was well received by all "the regions of Kurdistan [*memalik-i Kürdistan*]," specified as comprising Erzurum, Mosul, Ruha (Urfa), and Van (Mustafa Naima 2007, 899). He mentions Diyarbekir separately due to its different administrative identity; eight of the nineteen *sancak*s were administered by a Kurdish ruler residing there. Several of these *sancak*s are mentioned as being subject to taxes. Naima not only discusses the Kurds inhabiting the region referred to as Kurdistan but also describes in great detail those Kurds living outside Kurdistan, specifically in Sivas, Çorum, and Yozgat. For instance, he records that on one occasion in Sivas, many Turks, Kurds, Turcomans, and other ethnic groups that had gathered together from among Ottoman soldiers united to walk in protest against the leader of the region (Mustafa Naima 2007, 550).

Through time, then, particularly in the case of Evliya Çelebi's travelogue, Ottoman historians, bureaucrats, poets, and religious scholars became more publicly aware of the existence of the region of Kurdistan as well as of the Kurdish groups scattered across Anatolia, Iraq, and the Levant. It is therefore no accident that between the sixteenth and nineteenth

16. A Kurdish-speaking minority that emerged near Laliş in Iraqi Kurdistan during the twelfth century, the Yezidis follow a unique religious tradition that is traced back to ancient Mesopotamian religions such as Zoroastrianism as well as to the Abrahamic religions of Islam and Christianity.

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centuries the number of references made to Kurds in Ottoman sources increased, with the general references becoming eventually replaced by more specific ones. Yet such references are still selective in that the Kurds are mentioned more frequently in relation to a conflict—that is, upon the emergence of a rebellion or an incident that the Ottoman government is interested in. As such, Kurds start to become associated in the Ottoman imaginary with violence rather than with a people living in particular locations in the empire.

Ottoman Kurdistan of the Nineteenth Century: Case of the Baban Emirate

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the way that Ottoman and European sources referred to Kurdistan by name changed once again.[17] Gaspard Drouville (d. 1856), for instance, emphasized the difference between "Kurdistan" and its Persian namesake "Kourdistan"; whereas the former was the "the country inhabited by the Kurds," including the lands in both Iran and the Ottoman Empire, the latter referred to "the government of Muhammad Ali Mirza"—namely, a specific political entity, or a province, located in western Iran (1825, 220, 223).[18]

In the social construction of the concept of Kurdistan through history, Turks and Iranians play major roles. After all, the first documented use of the name "Kurdistan" was by the Seljuq Turks in the twelfth century, continuing with the Iranians from the Safavid period until today. Under the Ottomans, however, the name "Kurdistan" referred to the geographical boundaries of those lands predominantly inhabited by the Kurds; for a short period between 1847 and 1867, however, the Ottoman Sublime Porte also created a province named "Kurdistan."[19] I therefore argue here that

17. For this section, I rely on my doctoral thesis (Atmaca 2013, 5–9).

18. Muhammad Ali Mirza was the eldest son of the shah of Iran, Fath Ali Shah, and was appointed to the western frontier region (Kermanshah, Zohab, and Sonqor to Hamadan, Lorestan, Bakhtiari, and Khuzestan) as governor-general from 1809 until his death in 1821 (Amanat 1994).

19. For a detailed study of the "Kürdistan Eyaleti" of this period, see Ülke 2014.

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the name "Kurdistan" refers to two separate social spaces: Ottoman Kurdistan and Iranian Kurdistan.

The boundaries of Ottoman Kurdistan correspond to Iraqi Kurdistan today yet also included the provinces of Hakkari and Şırnak in modern Turkey. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, these regions altogether denoted "Kurdistan" in Ottoman official sources. Yet the same sources also started to use the name "Kurdistan" far less frequently and instead referred to particular Kurdish emirates. Over time, the Ottoman official usage further narrowed in focus in relation to the relative power of different emirates; in the end, the name "Kurdistan" referred exclusively to the Baban territories. In most European sources, Kurdistan was defined as the geographical location of the emirates of Botan, Hakkari, Behdinan (Amêdî), Soran (Rewandiz), and Baban. Some sources added Bitlis to this list after the turn of the nineteenth century, however. For instance, the French traveler Adrien Dupre (d. 1831), who visited "Curdistan" between 1807 and 1809, listed "les principautés Curdes" (the Kurdish principalities), or the Kurdish emirates, as "Soran, Baban, Badinan, Tchambo [Hakkari], Bottan and Bitlisi" (1819, 91). He referred to the region of Kurdistan located in Iran largely as the "Erdelan Principality," occasionally including the territories of Mukris west of Lake Urumiya.

In the early nineteenth century, a growing number of Ottoman historians started to refer to the region known as "Kurdistan" in terms of Şehrezûr (Şehrizor, roughly corresponding to today's Kirkuk) and the Baban *sancak*. The Ottoman court historian Şanizade (d. 1826), for instance, discussed the beys of Kurdistan by referring to the Kurdish emirs in Koye (Koy Sancak), Baban, and Şehrezûr (Şanizade Mehmet Ataullah 2008, 754–55). He was probably the first Ottoman official who selectively emphasized southern Kurdistan as playing a more dominant role in regional politics than any other part of the empire. Indeed, during the early nineteenth century the Babans became the dominant emirate of the region, thereby drawing the attention of Ottoman scholars. For instance, Şanizade noted that the interaction between the Ottomans and the Iranians almost always concerned the Kurds. In this particular case, the Ottomans had two requests from Iran: to cease its occupation of Kurdistan and to return any fugitive Baban pashas (Şanizade Mehmet Ataullah

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2008, 831). These interactions foreshadow the emergence of both the concept of southern Kurdistan and the significant role the Babans play in the process.

From the seventeenth century until 1784, the Babans were located in Qala Çolan (Karaçolan), a village-town in the north of Şehrezûr. After 1784, they moved their capital from Qala Çolan a few miles north to Milkhindî, naming the latter location "Silêmanî" in the process. The borders of the region ruled by the Baban dynasty were under constant change due to the repeated conflicts it had with its neighbors, including the Erdelan in the east on the Iranian side of Kurdistan and the Soran in the north. When not in a state of conflict with their neighbors, the Babans on occasion incorporated new lands onto their domain, including Kirkuk, Koye, Herîr, Şehribazar, and Pijder. As a consequence, the Babans were more frequently mentioned in a variety of sources. For instance, when Xane Pasha (d. 1732) occupied the Erdelani territories, the "influence of the [Baban] family stretched now with varying force from Kirkuk to Hamadan" (Longrigg 1925, 159). Again, when the Catholic father Giuseppe Campanile (d. 1835) visited the area around 1810, he noted that the Baban domains included "Karatcholan, Kara-Dar, Baziyan, Margu, Emar Menden, Hedjiler, Surdach, Kerabe, Korrok-Khoy, Serspi as well as Arbil, Kirkuk and Khoy-Sindjaq" (Campanile 2004, 40). At other times, the Baban domain remained strictly confined to Silêmanî. Particularly during the period from 1823 to 1851, upon the signing of the First Treaty of Erzurum, when the last Baban emir was removed from Silêmanî, the Babans were unable to expand their realm beyond their capital and some surrounding villages. This inability was due in part to the presence of Iranian and Turkish garrisons in their town as well as to the rise of the Mirê Kor ("the blind emir," d. 1838), emir of Soran emirate, in the northern neighborhood of Rewandiz (Longrigg 1925, 247, 249, 287).

The Ottoman official correspondence carefully distinguished Iranian Kurdistan from Ottoman Kurdistan when writing to the Iranian court. And when such official documents referred to Ottoman Kurdistan, they utilized the name "Kurdistan" without defining its boundaries or describing its geographical borders. Specifically, they used the name "Kurdistan" in reference to the Babans. On occasion, when the Ottomans referred to

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Kürdistan maddesi (the matter of Kurdistan) during disputes with the Iranians, it was evident that the region they had in mind was the Baban territories because they used *Kürdistan maddesi* interchangeably with *Baban maddesi* (the matter of Baban). For instance, a letter from the Ottoman governor of Baghdad, Davud Pasha, to the commander in chief (*serasker*), Rauf Pasha, dated 20 March 1824 (19 Receb 1239), states that "the matters related to the issue of Kurdistan have been sorted out [Kürdistan umurundan mâ'adâ olan mesâlih halledilmiş]," except for "the problem of the pashas of Kurdistan," who still allied with the Iranians. When discussing "the issue of Kurdistan," Davud Pasha was referring to the Baban *sancak*, and "the pashas of Kurdistan" specifically denoted the Baban leaders.[20]

Ottoman sources referred to the leaders of the Baban emirate interchangeably as the "Ottoman pashas" or *mutasarrıf*s (*sancak* governors) of Baban and later Silêmanî or as *Kürdistan mutasarrıfı* and *Kürdistan paşası*,[21] the pashas and leaders of Kurdistan. In terms of the concept of Ottoman Kurdistan, as more Kurdish regions were integrated into the Ottoman body politic, the titles of Kurdish political units changed from referencing a particular Kurdish dynasty to substituting the Ottoman administrative term instead, such as "Van *vilayeti*," "Hakkari *sancağı*," "Bayezid *sancağı*," and the like. Similarly, lands populated by the Kurds in the north of the Ottoman Empire, such as Erzurum, Van, Kars, Muş, and Bayezid, continued to be collectively referred to as *serhadd*, emphasizing their position in the Ottoman Empire as an imperial frontier; the Kurdish names and references were gradually silenced despite the Kurdish majority residing there. Cities in this region, such as Erzurum, were referred to as *serhad şehri*s ([Ottoman] frontier cities). Hence, it appears that the name "Kurdistan" gradually moved beyond the eastern boundaries of the

20. BOA, HAT #36617-A, 19.B.1239/20 Mar. 1824, Hatt-ı Humayun (HAT), Cumhurbaşkanlığı Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı (Directorate of Presidential State Archives; formerly Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi [BOA], Prime Ministry Ottoman Archive), Ankara and Istanbul.

21. See the Ottoman document "Kürdistan Mutasarrıfı," BOA, HAT #36750-I, 17.L.1239/15 June 1824.

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Ottoman Empire and the Ottoman imaginary to refer to Kurds residing outside of the empire.

Despite the large number of references in Ottoman official correspondence to the Babans as the regional leaders of Kurdistan, when these sources mention Kurdistan, they hardly ever allude to other Kurdish leaders within the Ottoman Empire, such as Bedirxan. Rather, the Ottoman documents mention and discuss Bedirxan with the mere administrative title of "an Ottoman official," such as the "*kaimmakam* of Cizre, Bedirxan Beg [Cizre kaymakamı Bedirhan bey]"[22] in one document or "the *mütesellim* of Cizre, Bedirxan *Beg* [Cizre mütesellimi Bedirhan Bey]"[23] in another. Ottoman officials' diminution of the status of Kurdish leaders in Ottoman Kurdistan also applies to other significant Kurdish leaders, such as Mîrê Kor, or "Muhammed, *Beg* of Rewandiz" ("Revanduz Beyi Mehmed Bey"), who joined the Ottoman side during the war with Iran because of his particular religious beliefs adhering to the Şafi'i school of law, which had more in common with the Sunni Ottomans than with the Shi'i Iranians.[24] In another Ottoman document, Ali Pasha, who was responsible for removing the governor of Baghdad, recounts the help provided by Revanduzlu Mehmed Bey, who moved on Baghdad with his forces together with "the *mutasarrıf* of Baban."[25] In summary, then, while the Ottoman sources initially referred to Kurdistan without any reservations, the appellation changed as, first, Kurdistan was divided into Ottoman Kurdistan and Iranian Kurdistan, and then Ottoman Kurdistan was further articulated as different Kurdish regions started getting included in the Ottoman body politic either as administrative divisions

22. BOA, C.NF (Cevdet Nafia) #959, Folio: 20, 8.Ca.1259/7 June 1843.

23. BOA, A.MKT (Sadaret-Mektubi Kalemi Ervakı) #86, Folio: 9, 19.S.1260/9 Mar. 1844. Another document talks about the effect that the sheikhs of Khalidiyya had on the removal of threatening forces belonging to "Mütesellim of Cizre, Bedirxan Beg." See BOA, A.MKT.MHM (Sadaret Mektubi Kalemi Mühimme Kalemi Evrakı) #61, Folio: 2, 17.C.1263/1 June 1847.

24. BOA, HAT #36750-M, 07.L 1239/5 June 1824.

25. BOA, HAT #20815, 08.L.1246/23 Mar. 1831.

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or as frontier cities. Finally, from the nineteenth century on, the Ottoman sources started to refer to the center of Kurdistan, if not Kurdistan itself, in reference to the Kurdish regions located outside of Anatolia, especially the Baban Emirate. Ultimately, then, it was political power that defined the region of Kurdistan through the centuries.

Kurdish Lands in European Sources

Moving beyond the Ottoman sources, many European—in particular British, Italian, and French—sources also refer to the Baban territories when discussing Kurdistan. For instance, two early Italian accounts pay special attention to the Babans. A Catholic father from the Vatican, Maurizio Garzoni (d. 1804), who was in Amêdî around the 1770s, counts the "five great Muslim principalities" of Kurdistan as "Bitlis," "Jazira" (Botan), "Amadia" (Behdinan), "Julamerg" (Hakkari), and "Karacholan" (Baban). After providing this information, Garzoni states that the Baban principality became the "the greatest and most powerful" one, especially after "it annexed the principality of Koi Sanjak [Soran]" (1787, 3–4). In addition to providing the names of the five Kurdish principalities, Garzoni estimates the overall size of Kurdistan at the time of his travels in the region by declaring that "this country in itself has an extent of around twenty-five days [of travel] by length and ten days by breadth" (3).

Another Catholic father, Giuseppe Campanile, who visited the Kurds thirty years after Garzoni, makes a similar observation about the Baban principality by stating that it is "the most extensive, most powerful, and most pleasant" emirate of all Kurdistan. Campanile adds two further Kurdish principalities to those already listed by Garzoni: "Soran" and "Baba[n]" (Campanile 2004, 12).[26] Whereas Garzoni does not name a capital for the entire Kurdistan region, Campanile contends that Bitlis is the center of Kurdistan because of its commercial importance and relative

26. Despite mentioning the Baban emirate, Father Campanile adds "Karatcholan" (Qala Çolan) to the list as well (2004, 11), perhaps relying on Garzoni's account.

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1.2. A European map produced by the German map publisher G. Matthäus Seutter, showing "Curdistania." From Seutter 1730.

beauty. In any case, Campanile explicitly notes that "some like to name it [Bitlis] as the capital of all Kurdistan" (2004, 12).

Beyond the information presented by these two Italian fathers, the most comprehensive source written about the Babans is James C. Rich's *Narrative of a Residence in Koordistan* (1836). The "Koordistan" in Rich's title is the region located in the Southeast of the Ottoman Empire, today's northern Iraq, where the Baban territories were centered in Silêmanî. At the end of the first volume of his book, Rich gives details of a scroll titled "The Dates and Facts Connected with the History of Koordistan," which he received from the Baban pashas. The list recounts mostly facts about the Baban family but also refers to other Kurdish pashas as well as to Ottoman

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and Iranian rulers to the extent they are associated with the Babans (Rich 1836, 385–87). Rich also employs the names "Turkish Koordistan," "Bebbeh Koordistan," and "Southern Koordistan" when referring to Baban territories.

Next, in the periodical *Christian Secretary*, an article on the hostility of Iranians toward Baghdad notes that the Iranian governor Muhammad Ali Mirza "got possession of Sulimania, the residence of Pacha of Kurdistan" (7 December 1824). In these sources, then, even though the Baban territories are referred to as "Kurdistan," the cited capital of the region varies: Silêmanî in some but the "capital of lower Kurdistan"[27] in others. Likewise, underneath a drawing of Silêmanî at the beginning of his book *A Voyage up the Persian Gulf*, the British traveler William Heude (1819) also identifies it as "Sulimâney, the Capital of Kurdistan" (figure 1.3).

The gradual strengthening of the position of the Kurdish Baban Emirate to be eventually identified with Kurdistan is also reflected in the titles bestowed upon each of the Kurdish *mîr*s (Kurdish version of *emir*). For instance, whereas most Kurdish *mîr*s in the Ottoman Empire were given the title *beg*/*bey*, Baban leaders were referred to as *paşa*. After the Tanzimat in 1839, even though the Baban leaders as well as other Kurdish *mîr*s were now renamed *mutasarrıf*, many of the former preserved the title *paşa*, which had been bestowed upon them by the sultan or the governor of the province. In nineteenth-century Ottoman documents, the Baban emirs were also referred to as *mîr-i mîran*, "emir of all emirs," or *beglerbegi* because the Ottomans considered them to be the most powerful of the Kurdish *mîr*s. Indeed, the Baban leader Süleyman Pasha was officially given the title *mirmiran* in 1837. The sultan's decree accompanying the title deed states "Baban Mutasarrıfı Süleyman Paşa'ya mirmiran ve oğlu Ahmed Bey'e de kapıcıbaşı nişanlarının itası" (the bestowal upon the Baban leader Süleyman Pasha of the decoration 'emir of emirs' and the bestowal upon his son Ahmed Bey of the decoration keeper of the palace gate).[28] In addition, French sources referred to one of the most influential Baban pashas,

27. See the entry "Solymania or Sherezur" in Brookes 1820.

28. BOA, HAT #23085, 29.Z.1252/5 April 1837.

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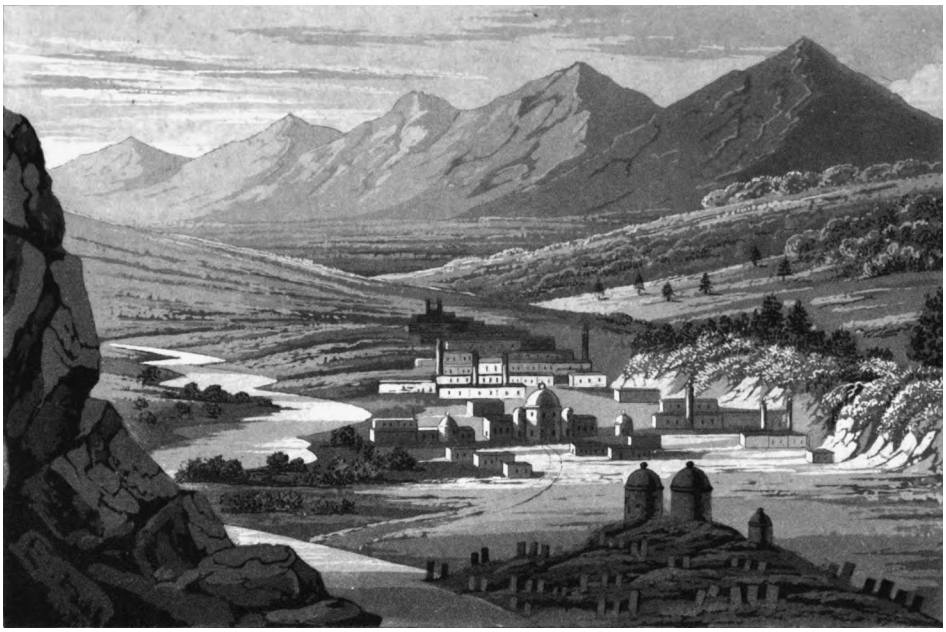

1.3. Drawing of Silêmanî with the subtitle "Sulimâney, the Capital of Kurdistan." From Heude 1819.

Abdurrahman (r. 1788–1813), as *mirmiran*.[29] Hence, the region of Kurdistan acquired different symbolic valence in the nineteenth century as the Ottoman sources started to equate Kurdistan with the Baban Emirate outside the empire but to silence references to Ottoman Kurdistan.

Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that the boundaries and capital of Kurdistan did not stay the same throughout the centuries. Whereas Bitlis was perceived as the center of the Kurdish culture, politics, and economics in the sixteenth century because of its literary and political power, Silêmanî

29. Correspondance Consulaire et Commerciale (CCC), Bassorah (Basra), vol. 2 (1810–13), nr. 058, in Nieuwenhuis 1981, 42.

replaced it in the nineteenth century (Chèref-ou'ddine 1873, 5). Interestingly, Şeref Xân also noted that Çemişgezek, located in Anatolia far away from Bitlis and Silêmanî, was "known by all especially with the name Kurdistan" and that the Ottoman official documents referred to "this province whenever this name ['Kurdistan'] is mentioned" (Scheref 1860, 163). Hence, the name "Kurdistan" came to denote a variety of geographical spaces throughout the centuries. I argue that what denoted Kurdistan was strongly connected with the local powers that ruled the regions where the Kurds lived because these local powers, such as the Ottomans, ultimately defined what constituted Kurdistan. From the nineteenth century on, when Kurds in the Ottoman Empire became incorporated into the empire as administrative units or frontier cities, the Ottomans as well as the Europeans started to refer to Kurdistan as a land distant from the center of the empire. As Kurds were thus symbolically removed from the Ottoman imaginary, their position within the empire kept worsening over time.

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