The Kurds and the Ottoman Empire: A History of Alliance, Autonomy, and Conflict

I. Introduction

The relationship between the Kurdish people and the Ottoman Empire, spanning roughly six centuries from the empire's rise around 1299 to its dissolution in 1922, represents a complex and dynamic chapter in Middle Eastern history.[1] It was a relationship characterized not by a single, static condition, but by a continuous evolution marked by periods of strategic alliance, negotiated autonomy, integration, and intense conflict. Understanding this long history is crucial for comprehending the political landscape of the modern Middle East and the roots of contemporary Kurdish political aspirations. The interaction unfolded across the vast, rugged, and strategically vital region broadly known as Kurdistan, encompassing mountainous and plateau areas stretching across parts of modern-day eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, western Iran, northern Syria, and Armenia.[3] This geographical position placed Kurdistan at the confluence of major empires, most notably the Ottoman and Safavid (and later Russian) powers, making it a critical frontier zone and often a battleground.[7]

The Kurdish population itself was, and remains, diverse, comprising numerous tribes (*aşirets*), speaking different dialects (primarily Kurmanji and Sorani, with Zaza also present), and adhering to various religious beliefs, including majority Sunni Islam (often Shafi'i), Alevism, and Yazidism, alongside Christian and Jewish communities residing within Kurdistan.[3] This internal heterogeneity influenced Kurdish interactions with the Ottoman state, as tribal loyalties, religious affiliations, and local power dynamics often intersected with broader imperial policies. The very concept of "Kurdistan" within the Ottoman framework was itself fluid; initially recognized as a distinct geographical and cultural region often appearing on Ottoman maps [7], it was only formally designated as an administrative province (*Eyalet-i Kürdistan*) for a brief period in the mid-19th century.[3] This administrative shift, occurring *after* the suppression of major autonomous Kurdish principalities, suggests it was less a grant of autonomy and more an attempt by the centralizing state to impose direct rule under a familiar regional name, reflecting the inherent tension between imperial recognition and the drive for control that characterized much of the relationship.

The trajectory of Kurd-Ottoman relations can be broadly understood as evolving from a pragmatic, often mutually beneficial alliance, forged in the crucible of the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry and based on shared geopolitical interests and a system of decentralized governance, towards a relationship increasingly defined by tension, conflict, and the erosion of Kurdish autonomy. This shift was primarily driven by the centralizing and modernizing reforms undertaken by the Ottoman state in the 19th century, which clashed fundamentally with the

established privileges and power structures of Kurdish emirates and tribes. These clashes, in turn, contributed significantly to the fragmentation of the old order and laid the groundwork for the emergence of modern Kurdish nationalism in the empire's final decades. This report will trace this complex evolution, examining the political, administrative, military, social, and cultural dimensions of the Kurd-Ottoman relationship across its long history.

II. Early Encounters and the Ottoman-Safavid Nexus (c. 1300-1514)

The Ottoman state emerged around 1299 under Osman I from a small Turkoman principality (*beylik*) in northwestern Anatolia.[1] Over the subsequent century and a half, Osman's successors aggressively expanded their territory, conquering Byzantine lands, absorbing other Anatolian beyliks, and pushing deep into the Balkans.[1] By the early 15th century, the Ottomans had transformed their polity into a major transcontinental power.

This expansion inevitably brought the Ottomans into contact with the diverse populations of eastern Anatolia and the surrounding regions, including long-established Kurdish communities. Kurdish principalities and tribal groups had been significant actors in the region for centuries, predating the Ottomans.[5] Dynasties like the Marwanids, who ruled from Diyarbakir between 990 and 1096, demonstrate a history of Kurdish political organization in the area.[5] Early interactions between Turks and Kurds occurred even before the Ottoman era, such as the Seljuk Turks demanding allegiance from the Marwanid Emirate in the 11th century.[32]

The defining factor that shaped the initial formal relationship between the Ottoman state and the majority of Kurdish groups was the rise of a powerful rival to the east: the Safavid Empire. Established by Shah Ismail I in the early 16th century, the Safavid dynasty unified Persia and adopted Twelver Shi'ism as its state religion.[8] This created an immediate and intense geopolitical and religious rivalry with the staunchly Sunni Ottoman Empire.[7] Eastern Anatolia and Upper Mesopotamia, the heartland of many Kurdish tribes, became the primary zone of contention between these two Islamic superpowers.[7]

The Safavids pursued policies that often alienated the predominantly Sunni Kurdish population within their domains, including instances of oppression and forced deportations, particularly near the Ottoman border, out of fear of Kurdish collaboration with their rivals.[7] Shah Ismail's imposition of Shi'ism and actions against Sunnis created further friction.[42] Consequently, the Kurdish-inhabited lands transformed into a crucial, contested buffer zone.[7] The Ottoman-Safavid conflict fundamentally structured the environment in which the Kurd-Ottoman relationship would be forged. Facing the Safavid challenge, the Ottomans recognized the strategic necessity of securing the loyalty, or at least the cooperation, of the Kurdish tribes controlling the mountainous eastern frontier. Simultaneously, many Kurdish leaders, feeling pressured by the Safavids and sharing a Sunni identity with the Ottomans, saw potential advantages in aligning with the rising power in Istanbul.[7] This convergence of strategic interests, driven by the external Safavid threat, set the stage for the pivotal Battle of

Chaldiran and the subsequent era of negotiated autonomy. Without this intense imperial rivalry, the Ottomans might well have pursued a policy of direct conquest rather than alliance and accommodation in Kurdistan.

III. The Pact of Amasya and the Era of Autonomy (1514 - early 19th Century)

The Battle of Chaldiran, fought on August 23, 1514, proved to be a watershed moment in Ottoman-Kurdish relations.[8] Ottoman Sultan Selim I, leading a large and well-equipped army featuring artillery and Janissaries armed with muskets, decisively defeated the Safavid forces of Shah Ismail I, whose army relied primarily on traditional cavalry charges.[41] This victory not only halted Safavid westward expansion but also significantly altered the political landscape of Eastern Anatolia.[39]

Crucially, many Kurdish tribes and leaders, predominantly Sunni and wary of Safavid Shi'a dominance, chose to side with the Ottomans in this conflict.[3] A key figure in facilitating this alliance was Mevlana Hakimeddin İdris Mevlana Hüsameddin Ali-ül Bitlisi, commonly known as Idris Bitlisi.[3] A Kurdish religious scholar, historian, and administrator with prior experience in the court of the Aq Qoyunlu dynasty (which the Safavids had overthrown), Bitlisi had sought refuge with the Ottomans and gained the trust of Sultan Selim I.[49] During the Chaldiran campaign, Bitlisi actively encouraged Kurdish chiefs to support the Ottoman cause.[49]

Following the Ottoman victory, Kurdish forces under Bitlisi's influence played a significant role in securing key cities like Diyarbakir from the Safavids.[3] After the battle, when the Safavids besieged Diyarbakir in 1515, Bitlisi reportedly led a force of 40,000 Kurdish warriors to break the siege.[32] Subsequently, more than 25 Kurdish lords formally petitioned Sultan Selim, via Bitlisi, requesting incorporation into the Ottoman Empire for protection against the Iranians.[49]

Idris Bitlisi is thus widely regarded as the architect of the formal Ottoman-Kurdish pact that emerged after Chaldiran.[32] His actions, however, are viewed through different lenses: some sources portray him as a pragmatic statesman who secured a beneficial arrangement for the Kurds within the powerful Ottoman framework [49], while others, particularly from a later nationalist perspective, critique him for facilitating Ottoman control and compromising Kurdish independence, allegedly for personal gain.[59] Regardless of interpretation, Bitlisi's mediation was instrumental in establishing a unique political structure for Ottoman Kurdistan.

In recognition of their crucial support against the Safavids, Sultan Selim I granted the Kurdish emirates (*beyliks* or *hükümets*) a significant degree of semi-autonomous status.[3] This arrangement, protected and recognized by the Ottoman state, allowed Kurdish leaders (*mirs* or *beys*) to rule their principalities hereditarily, often passing power from father to son.[3] These emirates enjoyed considerable administrative and judicial autonomy, managing their internal affairs according to local customs.[9] They were also granted significant fiscal privileges, including exemptions from certain taxes.[3] In return for this autonomy, the Kurdish emirates pledged loyalty to the Sultan and were obligated to provide military forces and supplies for Ottoman campaigns when required.[9] The degree of autonomy varied, with more powerful and

geographically remote tribes often enjoying greater independence.[16]
This system of autonomy reflected pre-modern imperial practices of indirect rule, relying on the co-option of local elites and personal loyalties rather than modern concepts of national self-determination.[3] It was a pragmatic solution for governing a vast, challenging, and strategically vital borderland, similar to arrangements the Ottomans employed in other peripheral regions like Bosnia or with Turcoman tribes.[48] The Ottomans incorporated these autonomous units within the broader provincial structure (*eyalets*), such as Diyarbekir, Van, and Mosul, which contained a mix of autonomous *hükümets*, hereditary Kurdish *sancaks*, and centrally administered *sancaks*.[7] The term "Ottoman Kurdistan" was used geographically and culturally during this period, appearing on maps and in administrative writings to denote the Kurdish-inhabited regions, even if it wasn't always a single, formal administrative unit.[3] Historical sources like the 17th-century travelogue of Evliya Çelebi and later Ottoman dictionaries describe its vast extent, emphasizing its role as a buffer against Persia.[7]
This era of autonomy lasted for approximately three centuries, from 1514 until the centralizing reforms of the early-to-mid 19th century.[3] The relationship during this long period was generally characterized by cooperation and mutual accommodation, underpinned by the shared threat from Safavid Iran and the Ottomans' need for border security.[7] The Ottomans valued Kurdistan as a "strong barrier and an iron castle" against Persia.[7] While not devoid of occasional conflict or Ottoman interference [9], this extended period of relative stability and self-governance fostered a sense among Kurdish elites of established rights and a specific, albeit subordinate, place within the Ottoman order. This historical precedent of autonomy profoundly shaped Kurdish expectations and contributed to the intensity of the resistance when the Ottoman state moved decisively to dismantle this system in the 19th century.

IV. Military Symbiosis and Service

The military dimension was central to the Ottoman-Kurdish relationship, particularly during the era of autonomy. The 1514 alliance was predicated on Kurdish military support against the Safavids, and Kurdish forces proved to be crucial allies in numerous Ottoman campaigns. Their participation was vital in the initial Ottoman expansion into Eastern Anatolia and Mesopotamia following the Battle of Chaldiran.[3] As mentioned, Kurdish forces led by Idris Bitlisi were instrumental in breaking the Safavid siege of Diyarbakir in 1515.[32] Kurdish princes, such as those of Soran and Cizre, actively seized territories like Kirkuk and Mosul from the Safavids in the name of the Ottoman Sultan.[58]
Beyond the Safavid front, Kurdish military support extended to other Ottoman endeavors. Kurdish troops participated in campaigns against the Mamluks in Syria and Egypt (1516-1517), contributing significantly to Selim I's victories.[32] Later historical accounts also mention Ottoman governors utilizing Kurdish forces against the Wahhabi movement in the Arabian Peninsula during the rise of the first Saudi state.[32] There are also references to Kurdish participation in Ottoman campaigns in Europe, including the Balkans and Hungary.[40] In return for this military service, which was a primary obligation under the autonomy agreements, Kurdish emirates maintained their self-governance and privileges.[9] This military symbiosis,

where the Ottomans gained valuable frontier troops and the Kurdish elites secured their positions, defined the relationship for centuries.

However, this dynamic underwent a significant transformation in the late 19th century with the creation of the Hamidiye Light Cavalry Regiments (*Hamidiye Hafif Süvari Alayları*).[3] Established by Sultan Abdul Hamid II in 1891 and named after him, these regiments represented a new approach to managing the Kurdish regions and utilizing Kurdish manpower, particularly after the earlier policy of centralization had dismantled the traditional emirates.[16] The stated purposes of the Hamidiye were multi-faceted: to emulate the Russian Cossacks as a mobile border force [71], patrol the sensitive Russo-Ottoman frontier [71], integrate and control the powerful Sunni Kurdish tribes [16], counter the perceived threat of Armenian nationalism and revolutionary activities [23], and bolster the Sultan's Pan-Islamist ideology by binding loyal Sunni groups directly to the Caliphate.[3]

The regiments were primarily composed of Sunni Kurdish tribesmen, although Turks, Circassians, Turkmens, Arabs, and Yörüks were also included.[71] Recruitment was based on tribal affiliation, and tribal chiefs often became regiment commanders, receiving Ottoman military ranks (like Pasha) and uniforms.[71] This structure attempted to harness traditional loyalties but channel them towards the central state, specifically the Sultan himself.

The Hamidiye quickly gained notoriety for their lack of discipline and brutality.[71] Far from simply patrolling the border, they were frequently employed by Ottoman authorities to harass, assault, and dispossess Armenian communities in the eastern provinces.[3] They were granted significant privileges, including modern weaponry supplied by the state, protection during migrations, and, crucially, widespread impunity for their actions.[28] Hamidiye members engaged in extortion, land grabbing, plunder, and murder, often targeting not only Armenians but also non-Hamidiye Kurds and other local populations, with little fear of government sanction.[71] This state-sponsored empowerment of certain tribes fundamentally altered local power balances, exacerbated inter-tribal conflicts [68], and created an atmosphere of lawlessness and terror in many areas.

The Hamidiye played a major role in the widespread massacres of Armenians between 1894 and 1896, known as the Hamidian Massacres, particularly in the suppression of the Sasun resistance.[3] They were later implicated again in the Armenian Genocide starting in 1915, participating in mass killings, deportations, and looting.[3] The Hamidiye experiment, therefore, represents a dark chapter in Ottoman-Kurdish military relations, transforming parts of the Kurdish population from autonomous allies into instruments of state repression and inter-communal violence. Though the name "Hamidiye" was dropped after Abdul Hamid II's deposition, the tribal cavalry structure persisted under different names.[71]

V. The Age of Centralization and Reform (19th Century)

The 19th century marked a period of profound transformation for the Ottoman Empire, driven by internal pressures and external challenges.[63] Faced with significant territorial losses,

particularly in the Balkans and North Africa [32], mounting economic difficulties and debt to European powers [93], the rise of nationalist movements among subject populations [32], and increasing diplomatic and military pressure from Europe [93], the Ottoman state embarked on a series of ambitious reforms aimed at modernization and centralization.[1] This era, encompassing the reigns of Sultans Selim III, Mahmud II, Abdülmecid I, Abdülaziz, and Abdul Hamid II, saw initiatives like the Nizam-I Cedid (New Order) [65], the Tanzimat reforms (1839-1876) inaugurated by the Hatt-ı Şerif of Gülhane (1839) and the Hatt-ı Hümayun (1856) [1], and the brief First Constitutional Era (1876-1878).[23] The overarching goal was to strengthen the state, preserve the empire, and reassert central authority over disparate regions and powerful local actors.

For Ottoman Kurdistan, these centralization policies had dramatic and disruptive consequences, fundamentally altering the relationship established in the 16th century. The semi-autonomous Kurdish emirates, which had functioned with considerable independence for centuries, were now seen as impediments to the centralizing state's goals.[12] Beginning decisively under Mahmud II and intensifying during the Tanzimat, the Ottoman government systematically dismantled these hereditary principalities.[3] Military campaigns were launched against resisting emirs, such as Mir Muhammad of Rawanduz in the 1830s and, most notably, Bedirhan Bey of Botan in the 1840s.[3] Defeated leaders and their families were often exiled to distant parts of the empire, effectively ending the hereditary rule of the old Kurdish aristocracy.[17]

Administratively, the abolished emirates were brought under direct Ottoman control through the appointment of governors and officials responsible to Istanbul.[17] The creation of the *Eyalet-i Kürdistan* (Kurdistan Province) between 1846 and 1867, encompassing many of the formerly autonomous areas, exemplified this strategy.[3] Imperial documents reveal this province was established explicitly to consolidate control over a region "saved – perhaps reconquered – from brigands" (referring to the resisting Kurdish leaders), rather than to recognize Kurdish political identity.[34] This province was centrally administered and relatively well-funded but was short-lived, eventually being replaced by the standard Vilayet system.[33] This administrative restructuring aimed to integrate Kurdistan more fully into the centralized bureaucratic framework of the reformed Ottoman state.

Land tenure was another critical area of reform with significant impact. The Ottoman Land Code of 1858 aimed to systematize land ownership, require registration of titles (*tapu*), increase tax revenues, and enhance state control.[100] However, its implementation in the complex social landscape of Kurdistan proved problematic.[101] Due to factors like peasant illiteracy, fear of taxation and conscription, distrust of state officials, and the influence of local elites, the registration process was often manipulated.[100] Communal village lands or lands traditionally cultivated by peasants were frequently registered in the names of powerful tribal chiefs (*aghas*), religious leaders (*sheikhs*), or urban merchants who had the means and influence to navigate the new system.[34] This had the paradoxical effect of legally concentrating land ownership in the hands of a new elite, dispossessing many small cultivators and turning them into tenants on land their families might have worked for

generations.[100] While intended to create individual property rights tied to the state, the reform inadvertently strengthened the economic power of certain local figures, albeit different ones from the old emirs, and contributed to social disruption and potential grievances.
Similarly, Tanzimat-era tax reforms aimed to abolish the inefficient and often exploitative tax-farming system (*iltizam*) and introduce more regularized, direct, and often monetized taxes levied by state officials.[34] This directly challenged the fiscal privileges previously enjoyed by autonomous Kurdish regions, which were largely exempt from central taxation or had their own systems.[3] Implementation faced significant hurdles in Kurdistan due to the rugged terrain, limited state infrastructure, and resistance from both elites losing privileges and commoners facing new burdens.[97] Peasants often found themselves subject to multiple layers of taxation – the new state taxes alongside traditional tribal dues.[94] The increased tax burden, coupled with the introduction of conscription requirements for the modernized Ottoman army [63], became major sources of discontent and fueled resistance against the central government.
The Tanzimat's emphasis on the legal equality of all Ottoman subjects, regardless of religion [23], also had unintended negative consequences for inter-communal relations, particularly between Kurds and Armenians.[92] While intended to foster Ottoman unity, these reforms were perceived by some traditional Kurdish elites as undermining their dominant position over Christian populations.[32] The failure to fully implement protections for non-Muslims, combined with the disruption of the old order, contributed to rising tensions that would erupt later in the century.[23] Thus, the 19th-century reforms, driven by the Ottoman state's desire to survive through centralization and modernization, profoundly reshaped the political, administrative, economic, and social landscape of Kurdistan, dismantling the centuries-old system of autonomy and setting the stage for widespread resistance.

VI. Resistance and Rebellion (19th Century)

The Ottoman centralization policies and Tanzimat reforms, which aimed to dismantle the traditional autonomy of Kurdish emirates and impose direct state control, inevitably provoked resistance. The 19th century witnessed a series of significant Kurdish rebellions across Ottoman Kurdistan.[31] While later nationalist narratives sometimes portray these uprisings as early stages of a unified struggle for an independent Kurdish nation-state, contemporary analysis suggests their primary motivations were largely reactions to specific Ottoman policies.[31] Kurdish leaders sought to protect their established positions, resist the loss of autonomy, oppose new forms of taxation and conscription, and react against perceived injustices or interference by the central government.[9] However, the rhetoric used by some leaders, notably Sheikh Ubeydullah, did begin to incorporate elements of a distinct Kurdish identity and broader political aspirations.[31]
The leadership of these rebellions reflected the changing power structures within Kurdish society. Early revolts were often led by the hereditary rulers (*mirs* or *pashas*) of the established emirates, directly challenging the loss of their political power. As these emirates were suppressed, religious figures (*sheikhs*), particularly from influential Sufi orders like the Naqshbandi and Qadiri, increasingly filled the leadership vacuum.[3] These sheikhs could

mobilize followers through their religious authority and networks, often addressing broader socio-economic grievances alongside political ones.
Several major uprisings marked the 19th century:

- **Babanzade Rebellions (1806-1808, 1812):** Occurring in the Baban Emirate centered around Süleymaniye, these early revolts led by Abdurrahman Pasha and Ahmet Pasha were likely triggered by Ottoman interference in the emirate's succession and early attempts to assert greater control.[17] These represent resistance from the traditional emirate leadership against challenges to their established authority.
- **Mir Muhammad of Rawanduz (1830s):** Known as Mir Kor, the ruler of the Soran Emirate expanded his influence significantly and resisted Ottoman centralization efforts.[34] His forces initially repelled an Ottoman army in 1834 [3], but he was eventually defeated by the modernized Ottoman forces under Reşid Mehmed Pasha around 1836.[3]
- **Bedirhan Bey Rebellion (1843-1847):** This was one of the most significant challenges to Ottoman centralization, led by Bedirhan Bey, the powerful emir of Botan.[3] Triggered by Tanzimat reforms and administrative changes designed to fragment his authority (specifically, attaching his capital Cizre to the Mosul Eyalet), Bedirhan asserted his power by minting coins and having Friday sermons read in his name, effectively declaring independence in 1847.[3] His rule was also marked by brutal campaigns against Yezidi and Assyrian Christian populations, partly in alliance with other Kurdish leaders like Nurullah Bey of Hakkari.[3] These massacres prompted pressure from European powers on the Ottomans to intervene.[3] An Ottoman army led by Omer Pasha, supported by vengeful Yezidi tribesmen, eventually defeated Bedirhan's forces in 1847 after a long siege. Bedirhan was captured, betrayed by a relative, and sent into exile, first to Crete and later to Damascus.[17] His defeat marked a major step in the elimination of the autonomous Kurdish emirates.
- **Sheikh Ubeydullah Nehri Rebellion (1879-1881):** Emerging in the power vacuum left by the destruction of the emirates, Sheikh Ubeydullah, an influential Naqshbandi leader from the Şemdinan region, led a large-scale revolt that challenged both Ottoman and Qajar Iranian authority.[3] The context included the aftermath of the Russo-Turkish War (1877-78), during which Ubeydullah had initially supported the Ottomans [3], and the Treaty of Berlin (1878), which granted rights and potential autonomy to Christian Armenians and Assyrians in areas overlapping with Kurdish settlement.[3] Ubeydullah expressed strong opposition to the formation of Armenian or Assyrian states.[3] His motivations appear complex, including resistance to Ottoman and Qajar encroachment, response to famine and Ottoman neglect [3], and aspirations for a unified, autonomous or independent Kurdistan under his leadership, articulated in explicitly nationalist terms ("The Kurdish nation... is a people apart").[31] He initially attempted a small uprising against the Ottomans in 1879, which failed.[121] In 1880, relying on Ottoman tolerance or perhaps tacit support initially, he launched a major invasion of northwestern Iran with tens of thousands of Kurdish tribesmen, capturing several cities.[109] However, his forces were eventually defeated by the Qajar army, and he retreated back into Ottoman

territory.[110] Facing pressure from European powers concerned about his treatment of Christians, the Ottomans eventually arrested Ubeydullah in 1881, exiling him first to Istanbul and then to Mecca, where he died.[110] His rebellion, though ultimately unsuccessful, is often considered a key moment in the development of modern Kurdish nationalism.

The Ottoman state responded to these challenges with increasing military force, deploying modernized armies that often outmatched the tribal levies of the Kurdish leaders.[3] Exile of defeated leaders and their families was a common tactic to break resistance.[17] The Ottomans also employed political strategies, including "divide and conquer" tactics to exploit inter-tribal rivalries.[9] These 19th-century conflicts fundamentally reshaped the political landscape of Kurdistan, replacing the old system of emirates with direct, though often contested, Ottoman rule, and paving the way for new forms of Kurdish political identity and mobilization in the 20th century.

Table 1: Major 19th Century Kurdish Rebellions Against the Ottoman Empire

Rebellion Name	Leader(s)	Dates	Region(s)	Key Causes/Triggers	Outcome
Babanzade Abdurrahman Paşa İsyanı	Babanzade Abdurrahman P.	1806-1808	Süleymaniye (Baban Emirate)	Ottoman interference in succession/governance; early centralization pressure [63]	Suppressed
Babanzade Ahmet Paşa İsyanı	Babanzade Ahmet Paşa	1812	Süleymaniye (Baban Emirate)	Ottoman interference in succession/governance [106]	Suppressed
Yezidi İsyanı	(Yezidi leaders)	1830-1833	Revanduz, Hakkâri	Resistance to Ottoman control/reforms [106]	Suppressed
Kör Mehmet Paşa İsyanı	Kör Mehmet Paşa	1830-1833	Erbil, Musul, Şirvan	Resistance to Ottoman control/reforms [106]	Suppressed
Mir Muhammed İsyanı	Mir Muhammed (Rawanduz)	1833-1837	Soran Emirate	Resistance to centralization, expansion of power [34]	Defeated by Ottoman forces (c. 1836), exiled
Bedirhan Bey	Bedirhan Bey	1843-1847	Botan Emirate	Resistance to	Defeated by

İsyanı			(centered in Cizre/Erzincan)	Tanzimat/centralization, administrative changes, autonomy [3]	Ottoman forces, exiled
Yezdanşir İsyanı	Yezdanşir	1855	Bitlis	Resistance to Ottoman control [106]	Suppressed
Bedirhan Osman Paşa İsyanı	Bedirhan Osman Paşa	1877-1878	Cizre, Midyat	Likely related to Russo-Turkish War fallout, local grievances [35]	Suppressed
Şeyh Ubeydullah Nehri İsyanı	Şeyh Ubeydullah Nehri	1879-1881	Hakkari/Şemdinan (Ottoman), NW Iran (Qajar)	Post-war instability, anti-Christian sentiment, famine, autonomy/nationalist aims [3]	Defeated by Qajars/Ottomans, exiled
Emin Ali Bedirhan İsyanı	Emin Ali Bedirhan	1889	Erzincan	Resistance to Ottoman control [106]	Suppressed

Note: Regions and specific causes are based on available snippet information and may require further research for complete detail. Erzincan listed for Bedirhan Bey in [106]/[106] seems less likely than Botan/Cizre based on other sources.

VII. Kurdish Society Under Ottoman Rule

Kurdish society under the Ottoman Empire was complex and multifaceted, shaped by tribal structures, religious diversity, linguistic realities, and evolving interactions with the imperial state. The *aşiret* (tribe) served as the fundamental unit of social and political organization for a large portion of the Kurdish population, particularly in rural and mountainous areas.[5] Tribal identity and loyalty were paramount, often superseding other affiliations.[16] Leadership within the tribes rested with hereditary chiefs, known variously as *aghas*, *beys*, or *mirs*, who wielded significant authority over their members.[5] Religious leaders, or *sheikhs*, particularly those associated with Sufi orders, also held considerable influence, which grew significantly in the 19th century after the decline of the emirates.[3] Rivalries between different tribes and emirates were common [7], hindering political unity but also providing opportunities for the Ottoman state to employ "divide and conquer" strategies.[9] Ottoman policies directly impacted these structures; the era of autonomy reinforced the power of the *mirs*, while 19th-century

centralization aimed to dismantle their authority, leading to resistance and a shift in local power towards *aghas* and *sheikhs*.[3] The later establishment of the Hamidiye regiments further empowered specific tribal leaders loyal to the Sultan.[16]

Religiously, Ottoman Kurdistan was diverse, though Sunni Islam predominated.[22] The majority of Kurds adhered to the Shafi'i school of Sunni jurisprudence, a distinction from their mostly Hanafi Turkish and Arab neighbors, which some Kurds viewed as an element of their identity.[16] Sufism played a vital role, with the Naqshbandi (especially the Khalidi branch originating with Mawlana Khalid in the early 19th century) and Qadiri orders being particularly influential.[3] The rise of sheikhs as political leaders in the 19th century was closely tied to these Sufi networks.[110] Sultan Abdul Hamid II's Pan-Islamist policies specifically targeted Sunni Kurds, aiming to solidify their loyalty to the Ottoman Caliphate through initiatives like the Hamidiye cavalry.[3]

Beyond Sunnism, significant minority religious groups existed among the Kurds. Alevi Kurds, primarily inhabiting regions like Dersim (Tunceli), followed distinct syncretic beliefs and practices, often facing historical marginalization and persecution from the Sunni Ottoman state.[15] Their relationship with the central government and other Kurdish groups was often complex and distinct. The Yazidis constituted another important ethno-religious minority, concentrated mainly in the Sinjar and Sheikhan areas.[22] Their unique faith, rooted in pre-Zoroastrian Iranic traditions but incorporating elements from other sources, led to frequent misinterpretations (e.g., accusations of "devil worship") and severe persecution under Ottoman rule.[23] Ottoman authorities and allied Sunni Kurdish tribes carried out numerous massacres and campaigns of forced conversion against the Yazidis, particularly in the 19th century.[3] Despite this persecution, Yazidis sometimes offered aid to other persecuted groups, such as Armenians.[124] Christian communities (Armenians and Assyrians/Nestorians) and Jewish populations also resided within the broader Kurdistan region, interacting with their Kurdish neighbors in various complex ways.[3] Ottoman policy towards this religious diversity was inconsistent, often prioritizing political loyalty and the Sunni Muslim identity over genuine tolerance, especially towards non-Muslims and heterodox Muslim groups like Alevis and Yazidis.

Linguistically, Kurdish (with its various dialects like Kurmanji and Sorani) was the vernacular of the vast majority of the Kurdish population.[5] However, it held no official status within the Ottoman Empire.[27] Formal administration, law, and higher education relied primarily on Ottoman Turkish, Arabic (especially for religious and legal matters), and Persian (historically influential in literature and high court culture).[36] Even within the autonomous Kurdish emirates, Kurdish was not typically used as the official written language.[135] This linguistic marginalization likely contributed to the slower development of a unified, literate national consciousness compared to groups like Armenians or Greeks, who had stronger institutional support for their languages via their respective millets. The first Kurdish-language newspaper, *Kürdistan*, only emerged late in the empire's existence, published by exiles in 1898.[27] This situation contrasts sharply with the policies of the later Turkish Republic, which actively banned the public use of Kurdish for decades.[8]

Socially, the traditional Kurdish way of life often involved nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralism, centered around sheep and goat herding across mountain pastures and plains.[3] Agriculture was practiced, but often marginally.[5] Over time, particularly with the imposition of borders and centralizing policies, settlement in villages and towns increased [3], and Kurds began entering urban centers like Istanbul in larger numbers.[5] Within the Ottoman social hierarchy, Muslims, including Kurds, generally held a higher status than non-Muslims (*dhimmis* or *raya*), who were subject to specific taxes like the *jizya* (poll tax) and faced certain legal and social restrictions, although the Tanzimat reforms aimed to establish legal equality.[18] Kurdish women traditionally played a more active role in public life compared to some other Middle Eastern societies, particularly in rural and tribal settings.[5] Overall, Kurdish society under Ottoman rule was a blend of traditional tribal and religious structures adapting, cooperating, and sometimes clashing with the overarching imperial framework.

VIII. Inter-Ethnic Relations: Kurds and Armenians

The relationship between Kurds and Armenians within the Ottoman Empire was one of long-term coexistence marked by both interdependence and significant conflict, particularly escalating in the final decades of the empire. For centuries, these two groups lived interspersed throughout the eastern Anatolian provinces, often in neighboring villages or the same towns.[5] Traditional socio-economic patterns often saw Armenians engaged in settled agriculture, crafts, and trade, while many Kurds practiced pastoral nomadism or lived within tribal structures.[5] This created forms of economic interdependence, but also laid the groundwork for exploitation.

A deeply unequal power dynamic frequently characterized the relationship, especially in rural areas. Kurdish tribes and their chieftains often exerted dominance over Armenian peasant communities.[81] This manifested in various forms of exploitation, including the imposition of irregular taxes or protection money (*hafir*), land disputes, livestock raiding, and outright violence.[81] Sources describe a situation akin to feudal dependence, where Armenians had little legal recourse against abuses by powerful Kurdish figures, as Ottoman courts often favored Muslims.[81] Despite these harsh realities, social mechanisms like *kirvelik* (a form of ritual co-parenthood or sponsorship) existed, creating bonds of fictive kinship and mutual obligation between individual Kurdish and Armenian families, suggesting a more complex social fabric than one of pure antagonism.[84]

The Ottoman state played a significant role in shaping, and often exacerbating, these inter-ethnic tensions, particularly from the mid-19th century onwards. The Tanzimat reforms, while promising equality, paradoxically contributed to conflict.[17] The weakening of traditional Kurdish emirates, which sometimes maintained a degree of local order, and the inconsistent application of reforms created instability. More directly, the formation of the Hamidiye cavalry regiments in the 1890s became a major catalyst for violence.[3] The Ottoman state under Sultan Abdul Hamid II deliberately armed and empowered these predominantly Kurdish tribal units, granting them impunity to suppress Armenian political aspirations and control the eastern provinces.[23] The Hamidiye regiments systematically harassed Armenian villagers, seized land

and property, and played a central role in the massacres of 1894-1896 (the Hamidian Massacres), including the brutal suppression of Armenian resistance in Sasun.[3] This state-sponsored violence, outsourced to Kurdish tribal forces, served Ottoman political goals but poisoned relations between the two communities.

During the Armenian Genocide, which began in 1915 under the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) government, the pattern of utilizing some Kurdish elements continued and intensified.[3] Some Kurdish tribes, including former Hamidiye units and irregulars often organized by the state's Special Organization or incentivized by amnesty or the promise of plunder, participated actively in the mass killings, deportations, and attacks on Armenian refugee convoys.[81] The motivations for participation were varied, including obedience to state orders, tribal interests (land acquisition, looting), religious animosity, and pre-existing local conflicts.[28] However, it is crucial to note that Kurdish involvement was not monolithic.[85] Some Kurdish individuals, families, and even entire communities (like the Alevi Kurds of Dersim) actively resisted the genocide and provided aid to Armenians, hiding refugees, adopting orphans, or even engaging in armed defense against Ottoman forces and participating tribes.[81] These acts of resistance and solidarity, often undertaken at great personal risk, underscore the complexity of Kurdish responses during this period.

Politically, relations were also complex. While historical antagonism and conflicting interests existed, there were also moments of attempted cooperation against the Ottoman state, particularly in the late imperial period. Figures like Abdul Rahman Bedir Khan reportedly met with Armenian revolutionaries, and Kurdish and Armenian representatives (Sharif Pasha and Boghos Nubar Pasha) collaborated briefly at the Paris Peace Conference after WWI to advocate for their respective national aspirations, envisioning cooperation between potential future Armenian and Kurdish states.[14] However, deep-seated mistrust, rival territorial claims over the same eastern Anatolian provinces [14], and the legacy of violence often hampered sustained political alliances. Figures like Sheikh Ubeydullah explicitly opposed the creation of an Armenian state in the region.[3] The Ottoman state actively worked to prevent Kurdish-Armenian cooperation, viewing it as a significant threat.[81] The tragic history of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, therefore, saw the Ottoman state successfully manipulate and deepen existing fissures between Kurds and Armenians for its own political ends, with devastating consequences, particularly for the Armenian population.

IX. The Late Empire: Nationalism, War, and Dissolution (1876-1923)

The final decades of the Ottoman Empire were marked by profound political upheaval, the rise of competing nationalisms, devastating wars, and ultimately, imperial collapse. This period witnessed the formalization, albeit contested, of Kurdish political activism and nationalism within the Ottoman context.

The First Constitutional Era (1876-1878), though brief, introduced a parliament and the concept of Ottoman citizenship, theoretically encompassing all subjects.[36] Sultan Abdul Hamid II suspended the constitution in 1878, ruling autocratically for three decades.[23] His reign saw

the suppression of dissent but also policies aimed at integrating certain groups, such as the Pan-Islamist outreach to Sunni Kurds through the Hamidiye regiments.[3]

The Young Turk Revolution of 1908 forced Abdul Hamid II to restore the 1908 Constitution, ushering in the Second Constitutional Era (1908-1920).[3] This period initially brought hopes of greater freedom and representation for all Ottoman groups, including Kurds.[28] Kurdish political and cultural activity saw a resurgence, with the establishment of Kurdish societies like the *Kürt Terraki ve Teavun Cemiyeti* (Kurdish Society for Progress and Mutual Aid) in Istanbul in 1908, founded by prominent figures including Sheikh Abdulkadir (son of Sheikh Ubeydullah) and members of the Bedir Khan family.[114] Kurdish newspapers and publications also emerged, advocating for cultural rights and political recognition.[14]

However, the relationship between Kurdish activists and the dominant political force of the era, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), became increasingly strained.[3] While some Kurds initially collaborated with or were members of the CUP [114], the CUP's ideological trajectory shifted decisively towards Turkish nationalism, particularly after the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) resulted in further territorial losses.[3] This Turkish nationalist focus, coupled with the CUP's centralizing tendencies, clashed with Kurdish aspirations for autonomy and cultural rights.[28] The CUP regime increasingly viewed non-Turkish nationalist movements, including the burgeoning Kurdish one, with suspicion and hostility, leading to suppression.[28] The CUP's destructive legacy, particularly its role in the Armenian Genocide and its policies towards Kurds during World War I, left a lasting negative imprint on Kurdish collective memory.[32]

The development of Kurdish nationalism during this period was complex and contested. While precursors existed in the 19th-century rebellions, particularly Sheikh Ubeydullah's explicit call for a distinct Kurdish nation [31], a unified nationalist movement aiming for an independent state was slow to consolidate.[31] Many Kurdish elites, even prominent activists, remained committed to the Ottoman framework, seeking autonomy, cultural rights (like the use of Kurdish language in administration and education), and recognition within the empire rather than outright separation.[14] For many Ottoman Kurds, identities were layered, with Islamic and Ottoman loyalties often coexisting with, or even taking precedence over, a purely ethnic Kurdish identity.[16] Some scholars argue that the lack of a unified Kurdish state historically, the fragmented tribal structure, and the absence of strong institutional support for Kurdish language and culture hindered the early development of a mass-based nationalism compared to other Ottoman groups.[31]

World War I (1914-1918) proved catastrophic for the Ottoman Empire and had a profound impact on the Kurds.[1] Ottoman Kurdistan became a major battleground between Ottoman and Russian forces.[113] Kurds participated in the war on multiple sides and with varying motivations. A considerable number served in the Ottoman army, particularly in the eastern front armies, and tribal leaders supplied irregular forces.[113] Estimates suggest hundreds of thousands of Kurds perished during the conflict.[91] However, Kurdish enthusiasm for the Ottoman war effort was often lacking; recruitment was resisted in some areas (like Dersim), desertions were common, and Ottoman commanders often distrusted their Kurdish troops.[130] Some Kurdish tribes and individuals participated in the Armenian Genocide, utilized by the CUP regime.[3]

Conversely, the war also saw several Kurdish rebellions against Ottoman authority, driven by fears of suffering the Armenians' fate, desires for autonomy, resistance to conscription and wartime hardships, and hopes for independence encouraged by Allied (British and Russian) promises of support.[130] Significant uprisings occurred in regions like Botan, Dersim, and Kiğı between 1915 and 1917.[130] Kurdish civilians also engaged in passive resistance, aiding Russian forces or sheltering Armenian refugees.[81] In 1916, the CUP government initiated deportations of Kurds, particularly from strategically sensitive areas like Dersim, Bitlis, and Erzurum, aiming to break tribal structures and dilute Kurdish populations, resulting in immense suffering and famine.[3] Towards the end of the war, in October 1918, Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji, a Qadiri sheikh in the Sulaymaniyah region, broke away from the collapsing Ottoman state, captured Ottoman troops, and established a quasi-independent Kurdish administration under British supervision, declaring himself "King of Kurdistan".[3]

The defeat of the Ottoman Empire in 1918 initially seemed to offer an opportunity for Kurdish statehood. Allied powers, particularly Britain, had made wartime promises, and US President Woodrow Wilson's principle of self-determination resonated with Kurdish nationalists.[5] The Treaty of Sèvres, signed between the Allies and the Ottoman government in August 1920, included provisions (Articles 62-64) for the creation of an autonomous Kurdistan in eastern Anatolia, with the possibility of full independence within a year if the Kurds demonstrated the desire and capability for it, subject to League of Nations approval.[5] However, the treaty was never fully implemented. It was fiercely rejected by the Turkish nationalist movement led by Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk), which fought a successful War of Independence against Allied-backed forces and the Istanbul government.[15] The subsequent Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which established the modern Republic of Turkey, made no mention of Kurdish autonomy or independence, effectively annulling the provisions of Sèvres and dividing the Kurdish-inhabited lands primarily between Turkey, Iraq (under British mandate), and Syria (under French mandate).[1] The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire thus resulted not in Kurdish independence, but in the fragmentation of Kurdistan across new nation-state borders and the beginning of a new chapter of Kurdish struggles within these successor states.

X. Conclusion

The six-century relationship between the Kurds and the Ottoman Empire was a complex tapestry woven with threads of strategic alliance, negotiated autonomy, military cooperation, social integration, cultural interaction, imperial centralization, and ultimately, intense conflict and the seeds of modern nationalism. It began not as a conquest in the traditional sense, but as a pragmatic alliance forged in the early 16th century against the common Safavid enemy. Facilitated by figures like Idris Bitlisi, this pact granted Kurdish emirates significant autonomy – hereditary rule, fiscal privileges, and administrative control – in exchange for loyalty and military service, establishing a system of indirect rule that defined the relationship for nearly three hundred years.[3] This long era fostered specific expectations among Kurdish elites and shaped the social and political landscape of Ottoman Kurdistan.

The 19th century marked a decisive rupture. Driven by existential threats and the imperative to

modernize, the Ottoman state embarked on centralization policies (Tanzimat reforms) that directly targeted the foundations of Kurdish autonomy.[9] The systematic abolition of the emirates, the imposition of direct administration, new taxation and conscription laws, and land reforms fundamentally altered the Kurd-Ottoman compact.[17] These reforms, intended to strengthen the empire, instead provoked widespread resistance and a series of major Kurdish rebellions throughout the century, led first by the traditional emirs like Bedirhan Bey and later by influential religious sheikhs like Sheikh Ubeydullah.[17] While primarily reactions against the loss of privilege and the imposition of central control, these uprisings began to articulate a growing sense of distinct Kurdish identity and political consciousness.

The late Ottoman period saw further complexities. Sultan Abdul Hamid II attempted to re-engage Sunni Kurds through Pan-Islamism and the controversial Hamidiye cavalry, using them as instruments against both external (Russian) and internal (Armenian) perceived threats, but also exacerbating inter-communal violence and local disorder.[3] The Young Turk era brought constitutional hopes but ultimately intensified Turkish nationalism, leading to policies like the forced deportation of Kurds during World War I.[3] Kurdish society itself remained diverse – tribally, religiously (Sunni, Alevi, Yezidi), and linguistically – often preventing unified action but also demonstrating resilience. Interactions with other groups, particularly Armenians, were deeply affected by shifting Ottoman policies, moving from complex coexistence to state-manipulated conflict and participation by some Kurds in the Armenian Genocide, alongside instances of Kurdish aid and resistance.[81]

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I and the subsequent Treaty of Lausanne ultimately denied the Kurds the independent state briefly envisioned in the Treaty of Sèvres.[8] Instead, the formerly Ottoman Kurdish lands were partitioned among new nation-states, primarily Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. The legacy of the Ottoman era – the memory of autonomy, the experience of centralization and rebellion, the impact of state manipulation on inter-ethnic relations, and the seeds of nationalism sown in the empire's final decades – continued to shape Kurdish identity and political struggles throughout the 20th century and into the present day. The long and often tumultuous relationship with the Ottoman state remains a crucial historical backdrop to understanding the enduring Kurdish question in the Middle East.

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