

The Officer and the Historian: Mihemed Emîn Zekî Bey and the Forging of Modern Kurdish History

Introduction: A Man of Two Worlds

Mihemed Emîn Zekî Bey (1880–1948) stands as a paradigmatic figure of the tumultuous transition from the Ottoman imperial order to the era of nation-states in the Middle East. His life encapsulates a profound paradox: he was both a product and a high-ranking functionary of the very Ottoman and, later, Iraqi state systems that sought to forge monolithic national identities, yet he masterfully leveraged the status and tools acquired from these systems to architect a distinct, scientific, and enduring historical narrative for the Kurdish nation.¹ Zekî Bey's career embodies the inherent contradictions faced by minority elites during this period, as they navigated the complex terrain between state service and a nascent national consciousness.

This report employs a historico-biographical approach, analyzing Zekî Bey's actions and writings not merely as a chronological sequence of events but as a thematic whole, constantly linking his personal trajectory to the broader political and intellectual currents of his time. It critically examines his legacy not just as a historian but as a political actor whose intellectual work was a deliberate form of political practice. He was at once an Ottoman staff officer, an Iraqi government minister, and the foundational historian of modern Kurdish nationalism—a man of two worlds who ultimately dedicated his life to documenting the history of one.¹

Part I: A Life in Service of Empire and State

Mihemed Emîn Zekî Bey's extensive career as a military officer and statesman was not incidental to his later work as a Kurdish historian; it was foundational. The skills, experiences, and access he gained while serving the Ottoman Empire and the Kingdom of Iraq provided the very framework upon which he would construct his intellectual legacy.

An Ottoman Education: From Sulaymaniyah to the War Academy

Born in Sulaymaniyah in 1880, Mihemed Emîn Zekî was the son of Hacı Abdurrahman, a tobacco merchant from the city's Guvisra neighborhood.¹ His early education was a blend of the traditional and the modern, a synthesis that would define his intellectual approach. He began at the Mela Abdülaziz madrasa, where the language of instruction was Persian, before enrolling in the region's first official Ottoman primary school and then the newly opened Military Rüştiye (Junior High) in Sulaymaniyah. This multilingual and multi-layered schooling exposed him to religious, classical, and modern military curricula, while his natural aptitude for art and poetry also became apparent.⁷

His academic brilliance propelled him into the elite echelons of the Ottoman military education system. He attended the Military İdadi (High School) in Baghdad before proceeding to Istanbul, where he entered the prestigious Ottoman Military College (Harp Akademisi) and subsequently graduated first in his class from the Higher War Academy in 1905.¹ In these institutions, he was a contemporary of the men who would later found the Turkish Republic, including Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Fevzi Çakmak, placing him at the very center of the late Ottoman military elite.

The Ottoman state, particularly through its modernizing military academies, aimed to create a loyal, unified officer corps dedicated to the central government, transcending ethnic origins. Yet this very system became an incubator for the nationalisms it sought to suppress. It brought together ambitious young men from diverse backgrounds—Kurds, Arabs, Albanians, Turks—and exposed them to modern European ideas of history, science, and the nation-state. For an intellectually gifted individual like Zekî Bey, this elite education provided not only a distinguished career path but also the critical and methodological tools he would later apply to a non-state, nationalist project. The rigorous training in cartography, strategic analysis, historical research, and languages—he was fluent in Kurdish, Turkish, Arabic, and Persian, and also knew French, English, and Russian—formed the intellectual arsenal he would later deploy to articulate a modern, "scientific" identity for the Kurdish people.⁵

The Sultan's Officer: A Career on the Frontiers of a Crumbling Empire

Upon graduating, Zekî Bey embarked on a distinguished military career that placed him on the front lines of the Ottoman Empire's final, convulsive decades. His early service was marked by technical expertise; after a brief posting with the 6th Army in Baghdad, he served as a topography officer and a member of the Map Inspection Board in Istanbul. He participated in crucial border demarcation commissions between the Ottoman Empire and both Bulgaria and Russia, an experience that gave him an intimate, cartographic understanding of the empire's contested frontiers.

His trial by fire came with the Balkan Wars, where he served as Chief of Staff on the Çatalca front in 1912. With the outbreak of World War I, his responsibilities escalated dramatically. Sent to the Iraq front, he was promoted to Major and served in key staff positions, including Head of Operations and later Head of Intelligence for the 6th Army. He participated in major engagements against the British, including the battles of Selmân-ı Pak (Ctesiphon) and the

Siege of Kut al-Amara.⁵ In 1917, he was transferred to the Palestine front, serving as Assistant Chief of Staff of the 7th Army, at times under the direct command of Mustafa Kemal Pasha, and saw action in the defense of Jerusalem and Nablus. His final wartime assignments took him to the Caucasus front and, ultimately, to the Department of War History in Istanbul. Even during his military service, Zekî Bey was an active intellectual, publishing several books in Ottoman Turkish on military history and strategy. Works such as *Irak'ı Nasıl Kaybettik* (How We Lost Iraq) and *Osmanlı Esfarı Hakkında Tetkikat* (Studies on Ottoman Wars) demonstrate his early penchant for rigorous historical analysis and his critical perspective on the empire's strategic failures.⁵ He was not an armchair historian; his direct, high-level involvement in the cataclysmic events that led to the empire's dissolution provided him with a unique vantage point. He witnessed firsthand the clash of empires and nascent nationalisms on the very lands that would become the modern Middle East. This experience directly informed his later historical work on the Kurds. He understood power, territory, and statecraft from a practitioner's perspective, lending his histories a pragmatic, realist edge often absent in purely academic or romantic nationalist accounts.

The King's Minister: Building the Modern Iraqi State

With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Zekî Bey pivoted to a new reality. He returned to Baghdad in 1923 and transitioned his service to the newly formed Kingdom of Iraq, first as a lecturer and administrator at the Iraqi Military School and then as an officer in the new national army under the British Mandate. This marked his shift from an Ottoman to an Iraqi state identity, a complex transition he shared with many of his generation. His abilities were quickly recognized, and he embarked on a long and influential political career.

Over the next two decades, Zekî Bey became one of the most prominent Kurdish figures in the Iraqi government. He was repeatedly appointed to key ministerial portfolios, serving as Minister of Transport (1925-27), Minister of Education (1927-28), Minister of Defense (1929), and Minister of Economy and Finance (1931), among other posts.¹ He was also elected to parliament multiple times representing the Kurdish cities of Sulaymaniyah and Erbil, and his political career culminated in his service as President of the Chamber of Deputies from December 1944 to June 1946.¹

His position was one of profound contradiction. He was an architect of the institutions of the modern Iraqi state, a state that was increasingly defined by an overarching Arab national identity. Yet, from within this system, he worked to advance Kurdish interests. A key example was his role as Minister of Economy in the first government of Nuri as-Said, where he was instrumental in delineating the boundaries of the Kurdish regions. This "insider's dilemma" defined his political life. His high-level participation in the Iraqi government was not simply a career choice but a strategic position. It granted him access to state archives, political networks, financial stability, and a platform of legitimacy that would have been inaccessible to an outsider or a revolutionary. He pursued a dual agenda: contributing to the development of the Iraqi state while simultaneously working to codify and protect a distinct Kurdish identity

and history. His political career provided the intellectual space and resources necessary to undertake his monumental historiographical work, which would become a cornerstone of modern Kurdish identity.

Table 1: Chronology of Mihemed Emîn Zekî Bey's Military and Political Career

Period	Key Appointments and Ranks
Ottoman Service (1902-1923)	
1902	Graduated Ottoman Military Academy as Infantry Second Lieutenant.
1905	Graduated Higher War Academy as Staff Officer (Major).
1907-1911	Member of Map Inspection Board; Topography Officer on Ottoman-Bulgarian and Ottoman-Russian Border Commissions.
1912	Chief of Staff, 5th Division, Çatalca Front (Balkan Wars).
1915-1917	Head of Operations, then Head of Intelligence, 6th Army, Iraq Front (World War I).
1917-1918	Assistant Chief of Staff, 7th Army, Palestine Front (World War I); Promoted to Colonel.
1918-1923	Assigned to Department of War History, Istanbul.
Iraqi Service (1924-1948)	
1924	Instructor and Administrator, Iraqi Military School, Baghdad.
1925-1927	Minister of Housing and Transportation.
1927-1928	Minister of Education.
1929	Minister of Defense.
1931-1932	Minister of Economy and Transportation.
1928-1943	Elected Member of Parliament for Sulaymaniyah and Erbil on multiple occasions.
1944-1946	President of the Chamber of Deputies.

Sources: ¹

Part II: The Architect of a National Past

While Mihemed Emîn Zekî Bey's public life was dedicated to the service of existing states, his intellectual life was devoted to laying the foundations for a nation. His historical writings were deliberate acts of construction, aimed at forging a modern, coherent, and defensible Kurdish national identity in an era when such an identity was either denied or actively suppressed.

Table 2: Major Published Works of Mihemed Emîn Zekî Bey

Title (Original and English Translation)	Year(s)	Language(s)	Genre/Subject
<i>Osmanlı Esfârı Hakkında Tetkikat</i> (Studies on Ottoman Wars)	1918/1920	Ottoman Turkish	Military History
<i>Irak'ı Nasıl Kaybettik</i> (How We Lost Iraq)	1920/1936	Ottoman Turkish	Military History
<i>Xulasayekî Tarîxî Kurd û Kurdistan</i> (A Short History of the Kurds and Kurdistan)	Vol. I: 1931, Vol. II: 1937	Kurdish, Arabic	Kurdology/History
<i>Tarîxî Silêmani</i> (History of Sulaymaniyah)	1939	Kurdish, Arabic	Kurdology/Local History
<i>Meşahirî Kurd</i> (Famous Kurds / Kurdish Notables)	Vol. I: 1945, Vol. II: 1947	Kurdish, Arabic	Kurdology/Biography

Sources: ¹

The Historiographical Imperative: Analyzing *Xulasayekî Tarîxî Kurd û Kurdistan*

Zekî Bey's magnum opus, *Xulasayekî Tarîxî Kurd û Kurdistan* (A Short History of the Kurds and Kurdistan), was born from a sense of profound intellectual and political urgency. In the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire's collapse, he observed the rise of state-sponsored Turkish and Arab nationalist histories that often assimilated or outright denied a distinct Kurdish past. As he noted in his introduction, his own growing sense of national belonging was met with an "anemia of academic information" about his people's origins, with existing accounts reducing Kurdish ancestry to dubious legends of Arab progenitors or mythical jinn. His work was conceived as a direct, scientific counter-narrative to this void.

To construct this narrative, he employed a pioneering methodology for Kurdish historiography. He undertook extensive research in the libraries and museums of Istanbul, Germany, and France, synthesizing a vast array of sources. He drew upon classical historians, the foundational 16th-century Kurdish chronicle *Sharafnameh* by Sharafkhan Bidlisi, and the works of contemporary European Orientalists like the Russian scholar Vladimir Minorsky.¹⁶ This sophisticated fusion of Eastern and Western, traditional and modern sources lent his work an unprecedented academic weight.

At the core of his historical thesis was a theory of Kurdish ethnogenesis designed to provide

the nation with both ancient, deep roots and a prestigious lineage. He argued that the Kurdish people were formed from two primary layers: an indigenous substratum of ancient Zagros Mountain peoples (such as the Guti, Lullubi, Kassites, and Subari) and a later superstratum of Indo-European migrants who arrived around the 10th century BCE (most notably the Medes and the Carduchians).¹³ This theory established the Kurds as an autochthonous people of the region while also connecting them to the celebrated Median Empire.

The work was structured in two volumes: the first, published in 1931, traced Kurdish history from antiquity to the modern era, while the second, published in 1937, provided a detailed history of the various Kurdish states and principalities that had existed through the centuries.¹ First written in Kurdish, the book was quickly recognized as a foundational text. Its translation into Arabic by Muhammad Ali Awni in 1939, enriched with extensive footnotes, amplified its influence across the Middle East, cementing its status as the most important work on Kurdish history since the

Sharafnameh.¹⁷

In the early 20th century, a nation's claim to legitimacy and statehood was often predicated on its ability to present a coherent, continuous, and distinct history tied to a specific territory. Zekî Bey's work was therefore more than a simple chronicle; it was an act of political cartography. By meticulously documenting ancient peoples, medieval dynasties like the Marwanids and Shaddadids, the Ayyubid empire, and later emirates such as Soran and Baban, and situating them within the geographical and historical space he defined as "Kurdistan," he was intellectually mapping the boundaries of a nation. His use of modern, Western academic standards was a deliberate strategy to make this map legible and legitimate to both a new generation of educated Kurds and the international community. In this sense, *Xulasayekî Tarîxî* functioned as a historical "deed of title" for the Kurdish nation, transforming fragmented chronicles and oral traditions into a unified, modern national narrative at the very moment the political map of the Middle East was being violently redrawn.

Populating the Narrative: *Meşahirî Kurd* and *Tarîxî Silêmani*

A national history requires more than a timeline; it needs heroes, symbols, and tangible locations to foster a sense of collective identity. To this end, Zekî Bey authored two other crucial works that complemented his grand historical survey. His two-volume *Meşahirî Kurd* (Famous Kurds), published in 1945 and 1947, was a biographical anthology designed to create a national pantheon.¹ In it, he documented the lives of prominent Kurdish figures who had achieved distinction in government, science, religion, art, and literature throughout history. His explicit aim was to highlight Kurdish contributions to the broader Islamic and regional civilization, providing a powerful counter-argument to narratives that portrayed Kurds as merely tribal or peripheral actors. The book served to populate the historical stage with exemplary figures, creating a "who's who" of the Kurdish nation and providing evidence of a sophisticated cultural and intellectual heritage.

His 1939 work, *Tarîxî Silêmani* (History of Sulaymaniyah), anchored the grand national narrative

in a specific, tangible place.¹ This work of microhistory detailed the past of his own hometown, a major Kurdish urban and cultural center. By chronicling its rulers, scholars, and social life, he provided a concrete example of Kurdish political and cultural achievement, moving the focus beyond the stereotypical image of nomadic tribes.²² Together, these two works were instrumental in creating a "usable past" for the modern Kurdish national movement. They transformed the abstract history outlined in *Xulasayekî Tarîxî* into a personal, populated, and rooted story, providing the symbols, figures, and sites of memory necessary for the construction of a modern collective identity.

Conclusion: Reconciling the Contradictions, Defining a Legacy

The life and work of Mihemed Emîn Zekî Bey are defined by the central paradox of his era. His career as an Ottoman officer and an Iraqi minister made him a consummate "insider," a builder of the very state structures that often sought to marginalize his own people. Yet, this insider status was inextricably linked to his success as the foundational historian of the Kurdish nation. He was a man who served the state while simultaneously authoring the historical narrative that would give intellectual fuel to movements challenging that state's unitary claims. His legacy is profound and enduring. Zekî Bey is rightly remembered as the "father of modern Kurdish history". He successfully established a modern, scientific framework for the study of the Kurdish past, moving it beyond myth and folklore and placing it in dialogue with world history. His works, particularly *Xulasayekî Tarîxî Kurd û Kurdistan*, remain canonical in Kurdish studies and continue to shape Kurdish national consciousness decades after his death in Sulaymaniyah in July 1948.¹ He provided a generation of Kurds with a "deed of title" to their own history, an intellectual bulwark against assimilation and denial.

Ultimately, Mihemed Emîn Zekî Bey must be understood as a figure of profound historical transition. His life story is the story of the end of empire and the birth of nations in the Middle East, with all its attendant complexities and contradictions. He was not merely a chronicler of this change; he was an active participant and a shaper of its outcomes, leaving behind an intellectual legacy that continues to inform the political realities of the region today. The nationalist passion that drove his life's work is best captured in his own poignant verse:

Eger Mirdim û nemdî qewmekem serberz û azad

Bizanin dinalî ruhekem ta rojî mîad

"If I die and have not seen my nation proud and free,

Know that my soul will lament until the day of judgment."

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