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THE OTHER NAHDAS: THE BEDIRXANS, THE MILLIS 
AND THE TRIBAL ROOTS OF KURDISTAN NATIONALISM IN SYRIA*

Introduction

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

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

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

1. The Botan Emirate, 1514-1847

The Bedirxans who were to play such a pivotal role in the articulation of a Kurdish national identity in Damascus and Beirut were scions of the semi-autonomous emirate that ruled Cizre (Gazi Hatun 'Umar) in Botan, just across the Tigris from what is today Syria, for much of the Ottoman period. Like several other principalities of Ottoman Kurdistan, the Cizre emirate was formed after leading families in the region swore fealty to the sultanate, following the defeat of the Shite Safavids at 'Alâeddîn in 1514, in return for their recognition as local hereditary governors. The Bedirxans claim descent from the first emirs of Botan, the Azîzîn clan, relatives of the Şêxêfân of Bedîr who were the engineers—as well as the only contemporary historiographers—of this Ottoman-Kurdish rapprochement. Beyond that there has actually been very little historical investigation of the emirates (beğlik ve înhikâm), whose precise status and territorial delimitation, as Hakim Özoğlu has recently shown, fluctuated over time in accordance with internal power struggles as well as the Ottoman state's periodic attempts to impose more direct control. Chancery documents from the 16th century record in some detail the career of "Bedir Bişer", quite likely a direct forebear of the famous 19th-century emir Bedir HÎxan Bişer for whom the family is known, as "ruler" (bakım) of Cizre. Throughout the 1570's, this Bedir Bişer was called upon to assist in putting down refractory tribes in the region as well to join the imperial campaigns against Iran; by 1578, however, his son and pre-sumably at this point his successor, Seyyid Mîhemed Bişer, was being reprimanded for oppressing villages in his area of fiscal control. There is little that distinguishes the emirate in later decades, when in any event it formed part of the eyâlet of Diyarbekir. If there was an actual tribe known as the Azîzan, they are barely accounted for in Ottoman administrative records, even at a time when the entire region came within the purview of a massive imperial program of tribal settlement and relocation in the late 17th and 18th century. It is likely that the rule of the Azîzan emirs did not extend very far beyond Cizre into Kurdish tribal areas.

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

2. The Bedirxans in Syria

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


2. Hakim Özoğlu, The Other Nahda: The Bedirxans, the Mills...
level provincial office, then exiled to Syria (Acre) once more for his purported role in a 1906 palace plot against Abdülhamid. Two years later he was back in Istanbul, where the family owned a summer mansion on Büyükada, and became a founding member of the Kürdistan Tevakan ve Terakkı Cemiyeti, the Young Turk inspired "Society for Mutual Aid and Progress" that led the call for a Kurdish cultural awakening under Ottoman dominion.  

The radicalization of Kurdish national thought would devolve upon a younger generation of intellectuals, chief among them his three sons Surėya, Celadet and Kamran. They and other Istanbul-based activists and newspaper writers worked for the recognition of Kurdish rights within a progressive Turkish state right until 1919, when the start of Mustafa Kemal's war of liberation against the allied occupation forces heralded the ascendancy of a Turkish ethnic nationalism. By then Surėya had already gone to join their uncle Mişqdad to publish the first Kurdish newspaper, Kürdistan, in Cairo. Celadet and Kamran, on the other hand, set out from Aleppo with British army major E.M. Noel, the "Kurdish Col. Lawrence," to see about establishing a British client state in south-central and eastern Anatolia.7 With the unmasking and expulsion of the Noel mission by the Kemalists in September 1919, however, the two brothers had little choice but to return to Syria indefinitely to continue their propaganda effort in favour of Kurdish nationhood.

Hawar ("The Cry for Help"), the first Kurdish-language newspaper to adopt use of the Latin alphabet, represents the Bedirxans' most important contribution to the Kurdish nablāh. Launched in Damascus in 1932, it was discontinued intermittently over the next years but received renewed support from the French authorities during World War II and appeared again regularly, along with its illustrated supplement Ronaldo ("Light"), between 1941 and 1943. Its siblings Roja Nū ("New Day") and Sēr ("Star") were published by Kamran in Beirut from 1943 to 1946. Together with the Kurdish-French dictionary that the Bedirxans compiled with the aid of the French orientalists and mandate officers Roger Lescot and Pierre Rondot, these publications served to standardize the grammar and writing of modern Kurmanji Kurdish, and provided an important common reference for educated Kurds throughout the region.8 Their concern was not in any way with Kurds and Kurdish society in Syria. Hawar's debut responded to the radicalization of ethnic nationalism in Turkey and in particular the promulgation of the Turkish History Thesis in 1932, and it served the Bedirxans to in turn expound the Kurds' Aryan identity and their dissociation from the Turkic race. As per order of the French authorities, the newspapers were otherwise apolitical in content, and in any case incomprehensible to many Kurds especially in north-western Syria inasmuch as they consecrated the Bedirxans' native Botani as the one standard dialect of Kurmanji Kurdish. Celadet and Kamran's stewarding of the Kurdish nablāh in Syria ultimately aimed to build up and concretize their social capital within the nascent pan-Kurdish international, an important first step in reclaiming the political role the family had enjoyed as leaders of a semi-autonomous Kurdish principality in the past.9

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


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


11 - Malmisanim, Bedirxaniyner, p. 127-129.

advocate of Kurdish culture in the country. A member of the Syrian Women’s Union and delegate at the 1944 Women’s World Congress in Cairo, Rewšen married Celadet Bedirxan and shared actively in his life’s work. After his death she continued to write on Kurdish issues and participate in international conferences in addition to working as a schoolteacher. In 1956 she helped found the learning and mutual aid society Komela Zanisti u Alîkariya in Aleppo, and she remained an active participant in Kurdish women’s leagues in Syria and Iraq until her death in 1992.\(^\text{13}\)

**Xwebûn and its Discontents**

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

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

II. Ottoman Tribal Politics in Northern Syria

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

\(^{13}\) Malmisani, Bedirhauser, p. 211-221.


\(^{16}\) "Îlz al-Dîn ‘Ali Millû, Hawî al-Akrâd fi maddînût Dimulî bayna ‘âmayî 1250-1979 m: Di-


\(^{18}\) Millû, Hawî al-Akrâd, p. 141.

\(^{19}\) Tejel, Le mouvement kurde, p. 263.


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

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

The Millıs and the End of Empire

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

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

26 - Stephen Longrigg, Four Centuries of Modern Iraq, Oxford University Press, 1925, 211, 223; Saksoğlu, Anadolu Dereşleri, 156-160.
30 - Babakanlık Archives: Hatt-ı Hümayün 24535; Ceved Dahilîye 13964.
itself after which Eyyüb again switched allegiances, lending his support to the Ottomans as they retook control of the Euphrates' east bank in 1834, only to fall victim, like the Bedirxans, to Mehmed Reşid Paşa’s subsequent campaign to reduce the region’s Kurdish emirates by force.32 During the Tanzimat reform period the Millis’ leaders were repeatedly harassed and imprisoned by the state authorities and saw many of their lands in the Gazirah seized by their old enemies among the Tayy and especially the Şanmır beduins.33 Details of the Millis’ history in this time are sketchy and often contradictory; their decline in number to only a few hundred tents, however, bears witness to the increasing efficacy of modern state control over the empire’s rural and tribal periphery.

It was Sultan Abdülhamid II’s return to tribal clientelism as a basis for provincial administration that set the stage for the Millis’ resurgence and the consolidation of their presence in northern Syria. Eyyüb Beg’s great-grandson Ibrahim, who succeeded to the chieftaincy in 1877, understood better than his predecessors (or contemporaries such as the Bedirxans) how to curry favour at the imperial palace while at the same time impressing the Europeans with his exemplary treatment of the region’s Christian populations. The result was that the Millis’ time-honoured banditry was now only winked at in Istanbul, but also earned Ibrahim “Paşa” the command over five Hamidiye regiments in southeast Anatolia. With some 6,000 of his own men issued with government arms, Ibrahim was able, through a combination of force and patronage, to completely subjugate the Kikü and Karakeçili Kurds and the Qays and TaYY Arabs and even to absorb parts of the traditionally hostile Şanmır into the Millis confederation. He could thus provide an unprecedented level of security for the region’s lucrative caravan trade, while also averting his tribes’ implication in the Armenian massacres at the end of the century. By 1901, western observers spoke admiringly of the “little empire” that Ibrahim Paşa administered from his fortress at Virancasheer and that stretched south all the way into the Gabal ‘Abd al-‘Aziz massif.34

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

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

The Gazirah Revolt, 1937-1938

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

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

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

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

p. 384-386. The Mills’ failure to support the Ararat revolt is corroborated by Turkish officials, who claimed that Mills and other Kurdish leaders inside Turkey were in fact collaborating with the government. See al-Akrad, 21 August 1930, reprinted in Konê Reş, Garm’iyyat Hûseyîn al-Akrad 1927 wa waqâ’i’ 1 laurat Ararat 1930, Irbîl, Ma’assar Mu‘îrî, 1998, p. 173.


Conclusion

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

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

45 – Al-Jazeera, interview with President Ba’ash al-Asad, 1 May 2004.
Leaders of the Milli Kurd Confederation in Syria

Keleş Evdo

Beşser
(d. 1751)

Omer
(fl. 1766-1768)

Mehmûd
(d. 1760)

Timur Paşa
(d. 1804)

Eyyüb Beg
(d. 1834)

Timo (Timûr) Beg
(d. 1840)

Memo (Mehmûd) Beg
(d. 1878)

İbrahim “Paşa”
(d. 1908)

Mehmûd Axa
(d. 1945)