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Metin Atmaca

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## Fragile frontiers: Sayyid Taha II and the role of Kurdish religio-political leadership in the Ottoman East during the First World War


Metin Atmaca 

Department of History, Social Sciences University of Ankara, Ankara, Turkey

Once the Ottoman center eliminated the Kurdish emirates in the mid-nineteenth century while centralizing their peripheral provinces, a power vacuum emerged despite the creation of new local administrations under their control. Communication with the tribal leaders (*aghas*) and control of the population in the most remote corners of the Ottoman East required the use of mediators. During this time, a sheikh, Sayyid Taha of Nehri (Taha al-Hakkari or Sayyid Taha I, d. 1853), who belonged to the Naqshbandi-Khalidi Sufi order and was the successor of Mawlana Khalid al-Sharizori (d. 1826), came to the attention of the Ottoman governors of the region.<sup>1</sup> Although the Qadiri Sufi order had been active in the region since the twelfth century, Sayyid Taha became the most influential religious leader throughout Kurdistan. His son Sheikh Ubeydullah (d. 1883) continued the work of his father and expanded the influence of the Naqshbandi-Khalidi, both in religious and political terms. As such, ‘the mantle of ulama was crowned with the turban of the “feudal baron”’.<sup>2</sup>

Sheikh Ubeydullah established himself as the *de facto* ruler of the central regions of Kurdistan, and cemented his position after leading a rebellion against the rulers of the Ottoman Eastern frontier areas and attempted a failed occupation of northwestern Iran in the autumn of 1880.<sup>3</sup> Even though the Ottomans eventually captured Sheikh Ubeydullah in 1883 and Sultan Abdulhamid II exiled him and his entire family to Mecca, the *Sadat* (descendants of prophet Muhammad, singular *Sayyid*) of Nehri had an unprecedented and permanent impact on the religious leaders and population of the region. After Abdulhamid II was ousted from power in 1909, as the *Sadat* of Nehri were no longer in exile, Sheikh Ubeydullah’s second eldest son Sayyid Abdulkadir (d. 1925) returned to Istanbul and joined the Ottoman Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) and was soon elected to the Senate. He was later elected to other significant posts, including the head of the Senate. Contrary to other family members who were exiled to Mecca, Sheikh Ubeydullah’s eldest son Sayyid Muhammed Sadiq stayed in Nehri, today’s Shamdinan (Şemdinli) in the south of Hakkari province, and remained a local leader, eschewing the Empire-scale political career chosen by his brother.<sup>4</sup>

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**CONTACT** Metin Atmaca  [metinatmaca@gmail.com](mailto:metinatmaca@gmail.com), [metin.atmaca@asbu.edu.tr](mailto:metin.atmaca@asbu.edu.tr)

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Viewing his father's life as mundane and similar to his uncle's, Sayyid Taha II chose a political career. Sayyid Taha II became active in Kurdistan politics at a young age. The present study aims to show that coming from a religio-political family, Sayyid Taha II was transformed into a political leader by his experiences mainly in the context of the First World War. Among the Kurdish leaders who did not support the Ottoman Empire, Sayyid Taha II emerged a rational yet unorthodox political leader who used various instruments, including religion, tribal kinship, and Kurdish identity, in order to establish an autonomous or independent Kurdistan under his leadership.

During ten years of CUP administration Taha II's situation would vacillate between banishment and amnesty along with each volatile development in the region and changes in the government. The fickle regional politics of the Ottomans, regardless of ruling party, was accepted by Taha II, who adopted and used similar tactics, as did many other regional religio-political leaders of the region. Indeed, the religious basis and justification to engage politically with Istanbul was established some three decades before Taha II, during the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II, when Taha II's grandfather Sheikh Ubeydullah fought for control of the Iranian side of the Ottoman-Iranian frontier region with an army of 20,000. Ubeydullah's Sunni followers in Iran were mistreated by the Iranian Shia-led government. As Abdulhamid II offered no protection to Ubeydullah's followers in Iran, the latter sought the support of the British, with whom he had good relations.<sup>5</sup>

There is a wealth of archival documents on Sayyid Taha II. The Ottoman archival documents contain more details about Taha II's political activities than the French, Iranian and British archives, although they are inconsistent, which makes meticulous and critical analysis necessary for reaching any conclusions. Beyond all, the Ottoman archival documents represent an official view of CUP on Taha II's political career that was influenced by regional Ottoman political concerns.

Despite his importance in late Ottoman Kurdish politics, the existing body of historical scholarship is limited.<sup>6</sup> The literature on the Ottoman East during the First World War is problematic due to nationalistic/political bias, regardless of country of origin. The historiography of the Eastern provinces focuses rather on the destruction of Armenians and the subsequent creation of the Turkish Republic. Turkish and Armenian historians have largely ignored the conflict between the Armenians and Kurds over the establishment of the borders of their independent states, which eventually overlapped, during the demise of the Ottoman Empire.

Both the Armenians and Kurds used historical accounts and maps in order to claim a larger portion of Eastern Anatolia as their homeland.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, the Armenians were less concerned about reclaiming land than drawing attention to the CUP massacre of Armenians, whereas the CUP's aim of Armenian massacres was to establish a greater ethno-nationalist state in Anatolia and regions to the east.<sup>8</sup> The dominant tendency in contemporary Turkish historiography concerning Armenians is to dispute the findings of studies on the annihilation of Armenians. Thus, the Turks and Armenians remain polarized – the Armenians accusing the Turks of annihilation and the Turks disputing such claims – while both sides ignore the role of third parties in the disputed events. On the other hand, Kurdish modern historiography is primarily focused on the Kurdish rebellions against the Ottomans and their failure to establish a nation-state. Kamal Mazhar Ahmad, a historian based in Iraqi Kurdistan, produced the most comprehensive work, perhaps the only book, about the Kurds and Kurdistan during the First World War. The book's focus is

the Kurdish and non-Muslim population statistics, Ottoman war strategy, and the Kurds' role in the Armenian massacres. As the book does not offer much detail about the overall role the Kurdish population and Kurdish leaders played in the First World War, the reader is left to surmise that their role was a minor one.<sup>9</sup>

This article comprises five sections. First, I shed light on the early life of Sayyid Taha II. His childhood, relations with other family members, education, personality as well as physical appearance shaped his early period of leadership. Moreover, his connection with contemporary Kurdish leaders, scholars and state officials formed his political views, which comprise the second section. In the third section, I discuss how the role of the sectarian discourse influenced the course of the war. State leaders as well as Kurdish local leaders, including Sayyid Taha, employed religious discourse in their political activities. The fourth section focuses on the attitude of the Kurds towards the war and the devastation of the population, both the Muslim and the Christian. The article finally turns to the war efforts of Sayyid Taha II and other Kurdish leaders in the Ottoman Empire. The war period provided Sayyid Taha II with the opportunity to consolidate his experience and leadership while preparing to adapt to the post-Ottoman order in the Middle East.

### **A leader emerging: Sayyid Taha II's formative years**

Sayyid Taha II was born in Nehri in 1892, almost ten years after his grandfather, uncle and several other members of his family were banished to Mecca from their homeland.<sup>10</sup> His father, Sayyid Sadiq, and his family were allowed to remain in Nehri because of their collaboration with the Ottomans.<sup>11</sup> Growing up in Nehri with numerous unanswered questions about why his grandfather and uncle were sent away from their homeland planted the seeds of an interest in politics. As Taha II's family was led by sheikhs of a well-known order, Naqshbandiyya, people who went to Haj to Mecca, especially during Haj, knew his family in exile and brought back news of them.<sup>12</sup> Along with the news from the Nehri family in exile, many of these pilgrims carried back the new ideas of growing number of religious opponents of Sultan Abdulhamid II's regime who were exiled to the Hijaz (the modern-day Mecca and Medina region).<sup>13</sup> Thus, during his adolescence, he was likely exposed to contemporary reactionary political ideology, especially the type used by religious orders to mobilize forces to fight against colonial powers.

Sayyid Taha II's first major conflict, which later shaped his political career tremendously, was not with the Ottoman officials but with his uncle Sayyid Abdulkadir on the leadership of the Nehri region. The differences in political maneuvering between Sayyid Taha II and his uncle Sayyid Abdulkadir shaped the course of Taha II's political career, causing him to diverge from the conventional politics of his uncle. The political division between both men widened after the death Taha II's father, Sayyid Sadiq, in 1911. Ottoman archives highlight the power struggle between Taha II and Abdulkadir for control of the Nehri region, located in Hakkari province of Eastern Turkey. As such, the region's population was concerned that in his bid to take control of the region, Taha II would organize some of the local tribes to fight against Abdulkadir and other local tribes.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the CUP ordered the local government administrators to solve the problem of family inheritance of the land claimed by both men and stop Sayyid Taha II's attempt to control the region.<sup>15</sup> The CUP regional representatives offered Taha II a deal; if he severed his ties with other local Kurdish leaders and the Russians on the Iranian side of the frontier, he could share

control of the Nehri region with Abdulkadir.<sup>16</sup> However, Sayyid Abdulkadir dismissed this deal because his close relationships with the CUP leadership in Istanbul led him to think he could eventually control the entire region. An American missionary W. A. Wigram was in the region at this time and documented the struggle between Taha II and Abdulkadir:

Of late years, a family quarrel has rather diminished the power of Sheikh Taha. His uncle Abd-I-Kadr, son of Obeid-Ullah, returned from Constantinople with the claim to be [what he is by all laws of primogeniture] the Head of the House. Fighting followed between the two... Both Sheikhs were arrested, but a compromise was arranged. Abd-I-Kadr agreed to accept a liberal allowance from the family funds; and to live in Stamboul, the city he knew, rather than set up as a savage chief in Kurdistan.<sup>17</sup>

Consequently, the problem was resolved in favor of Sayyid Abdulkadir, as Taha II got basically nothing other than release from custody and a damaged relationship with Istanbul. This was not only a setback for Taha II, but also for the CUP, as both Taha II and Abdulkadir effectively lost control of the Nehri region. Despite the fiasco, Istanbul did not lose hope and made several attempts to reduce the activities of Sayyid Taha. Taha II became aware of the CUP's intention to fully control the Nehri region and leave him powerless; thus, he stopped collaborating with the Russians for control of the region and through the Ottoman Embassy in Tehran offered to cease all political activity in the disputed region in return for the guaranteed security of his life and property.<sup>18</sup> The CUP instantly accepted Taha II's offer.<sup>19</sup>

As Taha II was raised in Nehri and his family included many religious scholars, it is safe to assume that he was quite knowledgeable concerning religious studies. When he turned sixteen, he traveled to Russian-controlled territories and befriended several foreign dignitaries, so in addition to Arabic, Turkish, and Kurdish, he spoke Russian, English, and French.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, Western accounts indicate that Taha II had an impressive physical appearance. Missionaries from England recorded that, 'at the age of nineteen years he weighed precisely that number of stone; and when a day's journey was unavoidable, it took two sturdy mules, with specially padded saddles, to bear his gross carcass along the way'.<sup>21</sup> The British officer A. M. Hamilton, who was stationed in Iraq in the early 1920s, once observed Sayyid Taha II atop a black stallion coming towards him through a jagged limestone passageway. He thought: 'Sayed Taha look[ed] indeed a true chieftain prince of the wilds'. After dismounting to greet him, Hamilton noted that he was quite tall and remarked that he appeared to 'look as imposing as possible when dealing with local rulers', and he 'felt almost insignificant before this big, smiling diplomat who asked polite questions'.<sup>22</sup>

Taha II's style of dress was markedly different from that of the other regional leaders and, as such, was always noticed when out in public.<sup>23</sup> During this period, Taha II also began to dress in European fashion, but in an understated way;<sup>24</sup> however, based on a photo and description provided by C. J. Edmonds – the British officer stationed in Iraq between 1919 and 1925 – he apparently lost interest in European fashion and favored his own unique take on traditional Kurdish dress.<sup>25</sup> His unusual style of dress was used as an expression of his politics. His balaclava-style helmet had a pompon top, which was 'the symbol of his branch of the Kurdish national movement'.<sup>26</sup>

In contrast to his physical appearance, reports on his personality vary. It was reported that, as his father Sadiq was a 'ruffian', Taha II followed suit, but 'without the stronger [counter balancing] qualities'<sup>27</sup> of his father. C. J. Edmonds described him as a man of

'great intelligence and considerable polish, physically tireless in spite of his weight, and a crack shot with a rifle'.<sup>28</sup> As Taha II belonged to a 'Sayyid' family – descendent of the Prophet – and was considered a 'sheikh' or more precisely a 'saint', people believed that Sayyid Taha II 'could work miracles, and they came many miles in order that his hands might be laid upon them to heal their sickness'.<sup>29</sup>

### His relationships with other Kurdish leaders

Prior to the start of the First World War, Sayyid Taha II had developed personal and political relationships with several religious and secular Kurdish leaders in the Ottoman Eastern provinces. Among such leaders was Abdurrezzak Bedirkhan of the Bedirkhani family that had led the Bohtan Emirate for some 300 years before the Ottomans took full control of their territory in the 1840s. As Taha II and Abdurrezzak were in Russia in 1913–1914, the Russian authorities tried to make them allies in their effort to control a larger portion of the Kurdish territory in the Ottoman East. That Russian plan was unsuccessful, and Taha II and Abdurrezzak each continued to work to gain control for themselves of as much of the territory as possible, so as to solidify their political power; however, both were captured by Iranians on the Iranian side of the border and subsequently freed by Simko Agha.<sup>30</sup> Abdurrezzak Bedirkhan was an important Kurdish leader during the First World War, as he established close relationships with Russian leaders so that they would help him establish an independent Kurdish state.<sup>31</sup> The Russian military established a permanent presence in Eastern Anatolia following the Russo-Ottoman War of 1828–29, and then sent their diplomats and scholars to the region to learn about the society and culture of the region.<sup>32</sup> By the turn of the twentieth century, the Russians were politically and militarily dominant in Kurdistan, including the Iranian parts; as such, Bedirkhan's alliance with the Russians was expected based on the Russians' ongoing presence in Kurdistan.

In addition to Taha II and Abdurrezzak, other Kurdish notables, including Abdulselam Barzani of Amadié (îmadiye) and the Kurdish Chief Hayreddin Berazi, maintained close contact with the Russians in the hope that they would aid in the establishment of an autonomous or independent Kurdistan.<sup>33</sup> Simultaneously, both the Russians and Ottomans sought the support of Kurdish tribes; the Russians used the Kurds as their allies against the Ottomans and vice versa, especially in the so-called Six Provinces (*Vilayat-ı Sitte*) of Van, Erzurum, Bitlis, Diyarbakir, Mamuret ül-Aziz (Elazığ), and Sivas. Even Kurds who did actively participate in the war were encouraged by the Russians and Ottomans to rebel and create chaos. The Russians wanted to protect its southern regions from a European incursion should there be a power vacuum, and used the Kurds and Armenians as allies to prevent such a vacuum;<sup>34</sup> however, the Russian attempt to garner Kurdish support was futile. Whatever Kurdish support the Russians had at the beginning of the war was lost shortly thereafter, primarily due to the incoherency of Russia's policy toward the Kurds and the conflicting interests of the Kurds and the Armenians.<sup>35</sup> The Russians weren't very successful at attracting Kurdish notables as allies. Yet, at the start of the war, Abdurrezzak, his uncle Kamil, and Sayyid Taha II sought Russian support for the formation of a Kurdish state; however, six months later, Sayyid Taha II sought out the Ottomans as a Kurdish ally, as he had limited success with the Russians. In retribution, the Russians destroyed his house in Nehri and imprisoned him until he escaped at the start of the Russian Revolution in October 1917.<sup>36</sup> Abdurrezzak remained in Russia until around the

time the First World War ended, when he was captured and executed by the Ottomans in Georgia.<sup>37</sup>

Abdurrezzak might have had the feeling that he was competing with Sayyid Taha II for leadership of Kurdistan, as both the Bedirkhani and Nehri families, respectively, desired to rule Kurdistan.<sup>38</sup> Taha II tried to ally himself with the Russians before the war, so as to establish 'Kurdish independence under Russian protection';<sup>39</sup> however, due to his close relationship with Ismail Agha Simko of the Shikak Tribe based on close family ties and his association with Sheikh Seyid Ali, both of whom the Russians did not trust, the Russians chose to work with Abdurrezzak.<sup>40</sup> As Simko continued to be politically active in the region, even after the war, the Ottomans, Russians, and Iranians sought to neutralize his influence.<sup>41</sup>

Sheikh Mahmud Barzinji was perhaps the most important and influential Kurdish leader in southern Kurdistan during the First World War. Based in Sulaimaniya, he claimed to be a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad; although the claim is difficult to prove, it is certain that he was a member of the Barzinji family (of the Qadiri Sufi Order), one of the most prestigious families of southern Kurdistan, which was renowned due to his great-great-grandfather Sheikh Ma'rif al-Node and his great-grandfather Kak Ahmad.<sup>42</sup> Since the early nineteenth century, there had been religious and political conflict between the sheikhs of the Qadiri and Naqshbandi orders. Despite the historical rift between these two Sufi orders, the cultural differences between the Bahdinan and Soran regions, and the physical distance between Nehri and Sulaimaniya, Sayyid Taha II remained in contact with Sheikh Mahmud.

In addition to the above-mentioned leaders, Sayyid Taha II corresponded with Sharif Pasha, the leader of the Kurdish delegate to the Paris Peace Conference of 1920, but they failed to develop an association. As leader of the Kurdish delegation, Sharif Pasha was the representative of the Kurdish civil organizations with political influence that were based in Istanbul. These organizations were primarily the sphere of Kurdish secular elites. Taha II, due to ideological differences and the fact that he was not located in Istanbul, but was conducting military operations in the Ottoman East, had little to no contact with Kurdish civil organizations. Nonetheless, Taha II was a member of two Kurdish organizations based in Kurdistan: Kurdish Solidarity and Progress Society (*Kürd Teavün ve Terakki Cemiyeti*) and Independence (*Xoybûn*).<sup>43</sup> Through these organizations, Taha II met other Kurdish notables, including Celadet Ali Bedirkhan,<sup>44</sup> Said-i Kurdi (Nursi),<sup>45</sup> Sheikh Abdulselam of Amadié, and Molla Selim of Bitlis. Although he maintained contact with such Kurdish notables and tribal leaders, Taha II never sought to establish a tribe of his own, as did Simko Agha of Shikaki Tribe, as he was from a Sayyid family; instead, his aim was widespread political influence over numerous regional tribes. In an effort to obtain such power, he established kinship with Simko by marrying his cousin.<sup>46</sup> Yet, despite this marriage and his family's reputation, Taha II's political influence over Kurdish tribes remained limited because the Nehri family divided its support between him and Sayyid Abdulkadir.<sup>47</sup> Despite his limited political and military success, based on Taha II's relationships with Kurdish leaders, and Ottoman, Iranian, Russian, and British officials, he must be considered in the context of a politically and socially pragmatic leader in his quest for Kurdish power and land, as well as his role as a charismatic, spiritual sheikh.

Ottoman records also indicate that Taha II was able to adapt to changing political and military conditions during and immediately following the First World War. For instance,

the governor of Van sent a message to Istanbul after the war about Sayyid Taha II's relationship with the British, stating that he was 'dangerous', whereas another message sent two weeks later reported that he was 'cooperative'.<sup>48</sup> These inconsistent messages may have been due to multiple interconnected factors. Alliances between the local regional leaders in the Ottoman East and European and Middle Eastern powers were volatile and unpredictable, as each group saw it necessary to control the region for their own security with the help of whichever local groups they could manage to obtain. In addition to that, it was the norm for European and Middle Eastern leaders to bribe the local regional leaders, tribes, and religious and ethnic groups with money, land, and political promises to gain their allegiance.

## Religion and War

As did the Ottomans, the Russians and British also used religion to enlist Kurdish allies. The British used novel religious arguments to convince the Kurds to fight with them. E. B. Soane, a British officer fluent in Kurdish, began publication of a propaganda magazine *Tigeyashteni Raste* (Understanding the Truth) in January 1918. The magazine's fourth issue stated that the fight against the Ottomans was not a fight against Islamic values because, 'religion and politics [were] two different things'.<sup>49</sup> The journal went so far as to report that CUP leaders were 'heretics' who should be resisted, as a religious duty, by all the faithful because, 'their government is unlawful', and their wickedness is such that, 'they dislike to hear the name of Muhammad, may God bless him and grant salvation, but when they hear the names of Enver, Talaat, and Jemal, they invoke God's blessings and peace upon them'.<sup>50</sup> The magazine went on to say that the CUP members 'were selling their great faith very cheaply for contemptible bribes'.<sup>51</sup> The magazine reported that the British, in contrast, were the true protectors of Islam and, as such, had to be supported. The magazine also reported on the 'prosperity' and 'happiness' enjoyed by 'many Islamic nations' under British rule, as evidence of 'British love' of Islam and Muslims, whereas Germany was reported to be, 'doing its best to wipe Muslims out', because Germany was, 'the enemy of Islam'.<sup>52</sup> Further evidence of 'British love' of Islam was a list published in the magazine of British citizens who renounced Christianity, converted to Islam, and took Muslim names.<sup>53</sup>

Religion was freely used by the Ottoman state as well as local religio-political and secular leaders to legitimize their political activity. As Ottoman Sultan-caliphs would declare jihad in order to unify and mobilize the population of their domain and beyond to wage war, so did the Kurdish sheikhs to fight Western powers, Iranian Shia, local Christians, and even the CUP.<sup>54</sup> Not only did Sayyid Abdulkadir, a member of CUP, call for Jihad in order to get Ottoman support for fighting the Russians, local Kurdish religious scholars (*ulama*) responded to his call by encouraging Kurds on religious grounds to join the fight against the Russians and Armenians, although some *ulama* attempted to limit the killing by their followers to Armenian militia. For instance, the Mufti of Palu urged the Kurds to fight against the Armenian militias only and to do no harm to the civilians. In contrast, CUP officials in Erzurum encouraged the local Muslim, Turkish and Kurdish, population to indiscriminately kill Armenians with calls to 'kill the Christians and fear nothing' and 'death to the Christians and long live the Muslims'.<sup>55</sup>

As the CUP used religion, so did local Kurdish religio-political leaders in opposition to the CUP regime, so as to garner support for their fight against the CUP as well as to



promote their political agendas. Their primary religious argument was that the CUP members were not Muslims, but were Freemasons and, therefore, blasphemous.<sup>56</sup> Sayyid Taha II began using a similar religious argument against the CUP after Molla Selim successfully used it to launch a rebellion against the CUP during the spring of 1914; Molla Selim's slogan for the rebellion was, 'we want the rule of Muhammed' (*Şeriat-ı Muhammedi istiyoruz*).<sup>57</sup> Moreover, non-religious leaders of the political opposition such as Abdurrezak used religion in order to encourage local Kurds to join the fight against the Ottomans. In a letter sent to Kurdish tribal leaders in Iran while in exile in Russian-held territory, he accused the CUP of being Freemasons and betraying Islam and summoned all Kurds to fight against these 'infidels' (CUP). The letter also made a religious argument to justify his political asylum in Russian-held territory, as follows: 'Be aware that to leave a Muslim state, which is evidenced to have suppressive manners, in order to seek refuge in a state is permissible even if it is not Islamic, and according to shari'ah it is compulsory to do that [when persecuted].'<sup>58</sup>

The indiscriminate use of religion for political purposes by all sides involved in the Kurdish fight for territorial control in the Ottoman East did irreparable damage to the relationship between the Ottomans and Kurds, a relationship which had been deteriorating since the Tanzimat reforms began in the 1840s. As the Ottomans generally ignored the subsequent repeated Kurdish uprisings, during the First World War, several Kurdish sheikhs and mollahs successfully launched Kurdish operations against the Ottomans. Kurdish disappointment with the fact that they were fighting against their former Muslim allies, the Ottomans, is summarized by Molla Selim who, just before being hanged by the Ottomans for his role in the Bitlis Uprising of 1914, said to his executioners from the gallows, 'Thank God that Muslims are hanging me. I have not seen Russians, but I hope that you will soon and that they will take vengeance on you for me.'<sup>59</sup>

## Kurds during the First World War

In the years that preceded the start of the First World War, Ottoman rule caused more destruction and human suffering in Kurdistan and the surrounding region than had occurred during the previous century. After coming to power, the CUP enforced land reforms that alienated the Kurds. The reforms were intended to weaken the landed classes economically and politically, but created a fear among the Kurds that the Armenians would reclaim the land given to the Kurds by the Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II. In addition, the CUP armed the Armenians and integrated them into the Ottoman army and disbanded the Kurdish Hamidiye regiments, exacerbating the situation and polarizing the Armenians and Kurds.<sup>60</sup> Occasionally, Ottoman and Armenian forces collaborated to fight Kurds, as in June 1913 when Armenian Dashnak forces joined the Ottoman army to fight against the Kurdish Gravi Tribe in southern Van.<sup>61</sup> This caused more suspicion among the local population against each other and led to further clashes and destruction in the region. This destruction and suffering increased exponentially during the First World War, especially among the Kurds to the north of Mosul and the Bohtan River.<sup>62</sup> During the four years of the war, multiple armies crossed the region numerous times and the region's cities experienced occupations, followed by insurgencies and counter-insurgencies.

During the First World War, the bulk of the CUP's activities were based on the promotion of a singular Turkish nationalist identity; as such, Kurdish organizations based in

Istanbul were forced to stop functioning by the CUP. Kurdish organizations also ceased to exist because a large portion of the Kurdish population fought in the Ottoman army against the Russians and Armenians, evidence of the CUP's successful use of national identity and religion for political gains. This loss of Kurdish unity resulted in many Kurdish religio-political leaders abandoning their demands for an autonomous and/or independent region until after the war; however, some Kurdish nationalists, including Sayyid Taha II and several members of the Bedirkhani Family, remained politically active in their quest for autonomy/independence from beyond Ottoman territory.

At the start of the First World War, the majority of able-bodied Kurdish men were immediately enlisted by the Ottoman army. Some of the Kurdish Light Cavalry Regiments, which had been formed by members of the former Hamidiye Regiments in the 1890s, were forced to join the Ottoman army and fight in the Ottoman East.<sup>63</sup> Kurdish historian M. Amin Zaki, who was also a high-ranking officer in the Ottoman army, reported that the vast majority of the Ottoman's Eleventh Army based in Mamuret ül-Aziz and their Twelfth Army based in Mosul were Kurds. In addition, he reports that most of the officers and soldiers of the Ninth and the Tenth Armies, based in Erzurum and Sivas, respectively, were dominated by Kurds. Kurds are also reported to have provided the Ottomans with 135 reserve cavalry squadrons, in addition to frontier units, gendarmerie, and security forces.<sup>64</sup>

As the First World War began, both the CUP and Sayyid Abdulkadir requested that Kurdish tribes in Iran and the eastern provinces join the Jihad against the Russians.<sup>65</sup> Although the Kurdish response to the call for Jihad was generally quite positive, many tribes ignored the request. Approximately two to four months after the war started, Kurdish soldiers began deserting the Ottoman Army: it was reported that soon after the war started, some 15,000 Kurdish cavalry deserted the Third Army alone, accounting for approximately 85 per cent of that army.<sup>66</sup> Many among Ottoman army deserters joined the Kurdish rebels.<sup>67</sup>

By the time the First World War started, the level of conflict between the Kurds, and the Ottomans and the Armenians was high. By March 1914, Molla Selim and Sheikh Abdulsalam led rebellions against the CUP in Bitlis and Bahdinan, respectively, in order to establish sharia law in the region, as a step towards establishing an autonomous region. In addition, the Bahdinan rebellion was in response to an increase in taxes. Molla Selim and Sheikh Abdulsalam, and their supporters, sought Russian and British support for their fight against the Ottomans. In the end, both rebellions were brutally suppressed, and both leaders were caught and executed, Molla Selim in Bitlis and Sheikh Abdulsalam in Mosul, at the beginning of the First World War along with several other mollahs.<sup>68</sup>

Kurdish religio-political leaders in the Ottoman East, such as Sheikh Abdulsalam and Molla Selim, were in communication with the Kurdish elites based in Istanbul, such as Sheikh Abdulkadir, Sherif Pasha, and Emin Ali Bedirkhan. The connection between the local Kurdish leaders and the Kurdish elite in Istanbul played an important role in the Kurdish rebellions that occurred in the Ottoman East.<sup>69</sup> Coinciding with the start of the First World War, Sheikh Abdulsalam sent a petition to the Ottoman Parliament that was illustrative of what most of the Kurdish religio-political leadership wanted. Included in the petition were state recognition of the Kurdish language, appointment of government officers fluent in Kurdish, the institution of Islamic law, installation of members of the Shafii sect to religious leadership positions in the Ottoman East, collection of taxes sanctioned by Islamic law only, and retention of the exemption from military service tax, provided such taxes were used only for road maintenance in the Ottoman East.<sup>70</sup>

In 1914, Sayyid Taha II, in conjunction with other Kurdish religio-political leaders, began to plan a rebellion against the CUP that was more synchronized than earlier rebellions. His goal was to have a trained army of 30,000 men, as well as another 100,000 untrained, but equipped, soldiers. With Russian support, the plan was to put an end to Ottoman sovereignty in the region.<sup>71</sup> However, attacks launched by Molla Selim and Abdulselam before Taha II's synchronized rebellion began alerted local Ottoman government officials to the level of Kurdish dissent, which led to the eventual cancellation of the planned rebellion by Taha II. The governor of Van had some knowledge of Taha II's planned rebellion as early as the spring of 1914 and surmised that any rebellion would continue throughout the summer of 1914. In his effort to quash any rebellion, he had spies to infiltrate Kurdish tribes, moved military personnel to important Kurdish settlements in the region, and sent reinforcements to all the garrisons along the Turko-Persian frontier. At the same time, a pro-CUP newspaper, *Chaldiran*, published articles describing Sayyid Taha II, Abdurrezzak, and Simko as enemies of Islam.<sup>72</sup> In addition, in response to active rebellion, the Ottomans executed several leaders in Bitlis that were close to Selim in March 1914 and relocated some 90 rebels from the Ottoman East to Sinop, on the Black Sea Coast, in May.<sup>73</sup> After the Bitlis rebellion was neutralized and order was established, the head of the regional Ottoman gendarmerie issued a short report on the current situation in Bitlis.<sup>74</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Sayyid Taha II had been in contact with the Russians through Simko Agha prior to the start of the First World War. In late 1912, he visited the Russian Consulate in Urumiya and after the meeting was recognized by the Russians as the leader of the region between Başkale and Mosul.<sup>75</sup> Having secured Russian support, Taha II then obtained the support of numerous anti-Ottoman Kurdish tribes that also had ongoing land disputes with the Armenians. With the help of these tribes and Russian support, he attempted to establish control of the Mirgevar Region.<sup>76</sup> He increased his popularity and level of support in the region by distributing ammunition he received from the Russians. Based on Taha II's activity in the region, the Ottomans fully expected an imminent rebellion, which in fact he was planning, especially in the vicinity of Van. Before Taha II was able to launch his large-scale and synchronized rebellion, Molla Selim revolted with several sheikhs and tribes in Bitlis.<sup>77</sup> That uprising was crushed within a month in April 1914. That rebellion made the Ottomans aware of the degree of Kurdish dissent.<sup>78</sup> In response to measures undertaken by the Ottomans following the Bitlis rebellion, Taha II was forced to abandon his planned rebellion. Sayyid Taha II and Simko Agha remained in the Urumiya Region, and were protected from the Ottomans by the Russians.

### Sayyid Taha II during the First World War

A few weeks before the Ottomans entered the First World War, the Ottoman ambassador to Tehran sent a ciphered telegraph to Istanbul reporting that Sayyid Taha II had taken refuge in the Ottoman Consulate in Tabriz, seeking protection from the Russians. Additionally, it reported that the Russians were aware of this situation and agreed to guarantee safe passage for Taha II back to Turkey.<sup>79</sup> Some time after he returned to Turkey, Taha II again contacted the Russians. Among the many reasons Taha II made contact with the Russians, charges of disloyalty brought against him by his uncle Sayyid Abdulkadir were primary. He subsequently traveled to Russia, spending some time in Novorossiysk before returning to the Ottoman-Iranian frontier with Russian protection.<sup>80</sup>

At the same time as Taha II was in Russia, the Ottomans were preparing to officially enter the war, which included a raid on Russian positions in the vicinity of Urumiya by a cavalry of 400 troops that consisted of Kurdish tribesmen in early October 1914. As the Russians were well equipped due to the railroad they had built in the region, they not only defended the raid successfully, but also pushed all Kurds out of Urumiya and its vicinity. In response to the expulsion of the Kurds from Iran, the Ottomans forced the Armenians out of Turkey into Russian-occupied Iranian territory.<sup>81</sup> These actions by both the Russians and Ottomans set the stage for a policy of ethnic cleansing by both sides. The Russians in December 1914 occupied Doğu Beyazıt and further west, expelling and killing the Kurds who didn't flee on their own both before and after the Russians' arrival and using the Armenians to garrison the region. By the time the Russians gave up control of the region in late 1917, only ten per cent of the Kurdish population remained, because most had fled or were expelled, others killed.<sup>82</sup> Following the Russians' retreat from the region, the Armenians and Assyrians fled northward because of the fear that the Kurds would take revenge for their support of the Russians. In the vacuum left by the Russians, the Ottomans, Kurds, and other local Muslim populations began to expel or kill the non-Muslims who remained in the region.<sup>83</sup>

The CUP considered the chaos that ensued following the Russians' retreat – especially the friction between the Kurdish and non-Muslim populations – as an opportunity to solidify their political influence in the region. The CUP sent letters to the Kurdish ulama and aghas in northwestern Iran calling for Jihad against the Russians. CUP member Sayyid Abdulkadir sent similar letters to Kurdish sheikhs in the Kurdish regions of the Ottoman East. Due to the economic, social, and political suffering of the Kurdish tribes under Russian rule in Iran, especially the Shikak, Mamesh, Mangur, Zarza, Herki, and Begzade tribes, and due also to the multiple calls for Jihad and the Muslim-non-Muslim strife-ridden atmosphere, the region was extremely volatile.<sup>84</sup> After the CUP deported the remaining Armenian population, they began clearing the region of the Kurdish population. Most of the population (about 700,000) was forced to flee to western Anatolia under the pretext of an impending Russian invasion, although close to half died along the way.<sup>85</sup> In 1916, the CUP government put into effect a law stipulating that the Kurds could not account for more than five per cent of the local population where they were exiled to, and that local Kurdish leaders were to be relocated to urban areas in western Anatolia.<sup>86</sup>

There were many cycles of Russian occupation of the Ottoman East followed by retreat during the entirety of the First World War and each time they retreated to Russia, Armenian citizens of the Ottoman Empire followed suit, and the Kurds fled to western Anatolia, while those who remained in the region massacred each other. It should be reiterated that the policies that the CUP pursued towards the Armenians and the Kurds before and during the First World War culminated in those mutual massacres. The Russians sought to prevent such massacres by appointing Kurdish leaders Kamil Bedirkhan and Abdurrezzak Bedirkhan, the governors of Erzurum and Bitlis, respectively, in 1917.<sup>87</sup> After leaving Erzurum and Bitlis after the start of the October Revolution, the Bedirkhani brothers remained in Russian-occupied northwestern Iran and Georgia, whereas Sayyid Taha II split his time between Ottoman and Iranian territory in response to what he was offered by the Ottomans. As such Taha II returned to Nehri and neighboring regions, including Amadie, Rawanduz, and Mosul, several times during the First World War. A telegram sent from Mosul to the CUP in Istanbul stated that he was in Mosul with Abdurrezzak on 23 April 1917 in

order to, 'provoke the Sunni Kurdish tribes'.<sup>88</sup> Another telegram arrived in Istanbul about one month after this stating that Taha II had escaped from Russian territory with Austrian and Ottoman soldiers and was on his way to Mosul.<sup>89</sup> In addition, some time after reportedly being in Mosul, the General Directorate of Security (*Emniyet-i Umumiye Müdürlüğü*) in Istanbul informed the governor of Van that Sayyid Taha II had requested amnesty, so that he could return to Nehri.<sup>90</sup> In mid-May 1917, Ottoman guards in Mosul apprehended Taha II's brother Sayyid Muslih and Sayyid Abdulkadir's son Sayyid Abdullah. The governor of Mosul used the capture of Taha II's brother as leverage to get Taha II to retire from politics. In addition, the governor of Mosul asked Istanbul for further instructions about what to do with Taha II and Abdurrezzak. The governor of Mosul subsequently suggested that both men should be paid a cash bribe and sent to Istanbul for additional negotiations.<sup>91</sup>

Turkish archival documents show that the CUP offered an amnesty and money to Sayyid Taha II on multiple occasions, in particular in response to difficult circumstances for which Taha II's cooperation was essential for the success of the CUP's plans.<sup>92</sup> The valleys of Hakkari Province were populated by Kurds and Assyrians, but were predominantly Assyrian; Taha II enjoyed political influence only among the Kurdish regions. Beginning in 1917, the Ottomans desperately needed the help of the Kurds of Hakkari Province to limit the effect of Russian expansionism on Assyrian Christian minority uprising against the Ottomans. Despite the help of the Kurds, the Assyrian leader Mar Shamun traveled to Urumiya to ask Russian forces to come to Hakkari Province to establish Russian rule and protect the Assyrian population. Because of the height of the mountains surrounding the valleys of Hakkari Province, the Russians considered the military risks due to the geography too great and did not go. As such, the region's Assyrians, who numbered some 15,000, left everything behind and moved to Urumiya. Nonetheless, the Ottomans still wanted the Assyrians eliminated from the region, or at least weakened, so that the Ottoman frontier could expand further east into regions inhabited by Iranian Kurdish tribes. In an effort to ensure the success of this expansion plan, the CUP administrators again offered Sayyid Taha II money and an amnesty, as well as the help of Simko Agha with the task of dealing with the region's Assyrians. A report prepared in February 1918 by Iranian officials in the province of Azerbaijan stated that the Ottomans were in correspondence with Simko Agha and Sayyid Taha II joined him in Urumiya with the intention of expanding their authority among the Kurdish tribes there.<sup>93</sup> The Ottomans also received help in dealing with the Assyrians from the Kurdish tribes located in areas south of Iranian Kurdistan, namely the Souchbulaq (Mahabad) and Sanandaj.<sup>94</sup> The conflict between the Kurds and Assyrians in Hakkari continued well into 1918. In March 1918, Simko Agha had Mar Shamun killed somewhere in the vicinity of Urumiya. This was followed by multiple massacres of Assyrians. Some Turkish historians working from a nationalistic perspective writing about the Kurdish–Assyrian conflict in Hakkari present Sayyid Taha II and his partner Simko Agha as warriors who fought for the Turkish army against Russian 'imperialism'. Both men, according to such historians, not only 'cooperated' with the Turkish army to put an end to 'Assyrian atrocities', but they did so with the help of the local 'Turcomans'.<sup>95</sup>

Toward the end of 1917, Basile Nikitine, the Russian Consul in Urumiya, stated that he had received a message from Sayyid Taha II on behalf of the Society for the Deliverance of Kurdistan (*Istihlas-ı Kurdistan*), in which he asks Nikitine to arrange a meeting between Taha II and the regional Russian military commander, so as 'to make a common plan for fighting the Turks and liberating Kurdistan'.<sup>96</sup> A liberated Kurdistan was not part of the

Russian agenda, as they were currently attempting to establish an Armenian state in the same region. Nonetheless, the Russians led Taha II and other Kurdish leaders to believe that they were considering an independent Kurdistan in order to placate them. An example of Russian attempts to keep the Kurds as allies without actually doing anything that benefited them comes from official British reports that state that the Russians made Sayyid Taha the 'figurehead of a nominally independent Kurdistan under Russian auspices' that existed only in theory.<sup>97</sup>

During the entirety of the First World War, the CUP government did all it could to ensure that Sayyid Abdulkadir remained its ally because of his influence on the Kurdish population. One CUP method was financial support of Abdulkadir's family. For example, following the Bitlis and Bahdinan uprising of 1914, the CUP awarded his son Sayyid Mehmet Efendi a military decoration (*mecidi*) probably with a monetary award for his 'various services to the population of Shamdinan'.<sup>98</sup> Moreover, the CUP was an ally of Sayyid Abdulkadir against his nephew Taha II concerning a land dispute in Shamdinan, and the CUP appointed Abdulkadir to various leadership positions in Istanbul and at Kurdish associations. Despite Abdulkadir's consistent loyalty to the CUP, as compared to Taha II's fickle allegiance, he was kept under close surveillance during the war. According to encrypted CUP correspondence, his visitors, telegrams, financial activities, and political relationships were closely monitored. Additionally, the CUP limited the ability of Abdulkadir's family, including his wife and son, to travel freely. Moreover, in 1918, a cipher was sent from the General Directorate of Security to the governors of Adana, Van, Mosul, and Bitlis asking them to report back concerning the degree of influence they thought Sayyid Abdulkadir and his son Sayyid Abdullah had on the Kurdish population and if they could still be considered loyal allies.<sup>99</sup>

The Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917 simply changed all the plans for Russia and Turkey. The Ottoman army, together with the help of Kurdish infantries, recaptured most of the territories lost at the beginning of the war, including Van, Erzincan and Erzurum, and they pushed all the Armenian troops back further northeast. Trying to extricate itself from the war, the Russian state was finally obliged to sign the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918. Russia agreed to cede Kars, Ardahan and Batum. With another agreement signed in June in Batum, Russia left the control of the Kars-Julfa railway to the Ottomans.<sup>100</sup> The Ottomans emerged out of this with a clear victory of regaining territories up to the frontier of 1878, whereas the Russians and more particularly their local ally, the Armenians, became the ultimate losers in this game. Beyond the Christian population, the Kurds came out with nothing but a population devastated by massacres, forced migration, famine and diseases, with ruined cities and lands left behind. In Nehri, where once Sayyid Taha ruled over thousands, only ten out of 250 houses were left standing, as well as only 60 out of 2000 houses in Rawanduz. In the same area, three out of 100 villages remained standing, while out of 1000 families of the Bradost tribe, only 157 of them survived.<sup>101</sup> By the end of the war, besides thousands of war casualties, probably over 500,000 civilians had perished.<sup>102</sup>

When the war ended and the Russian option disappeared, Sayyid Taha II continued seeking new alliances to support the establishment of a Kurdish state, independent or autonomous, including the Ottomans and Simko Agha.<sup>103</sup> By 1920, Sayyid Taha II at the age of 29 had become an adept regional politician as a result of his work with the Ottomans, Iranians, Russians, and British. Additionally, at this point in time, he pragmatically

came to consider independence for Kurdistan no better or worse than autonomy; what mattered most to him was that he maintain his leadership role.

Upon the withdrawal of the Russians from the Ottoman East, the British came to the region and took on the most powerful political role in Kurdish independence. Sayyid Taha II went to post-war Iraq at the time the British were fighting Ottoman forces to ensure the smooth transition to British rule in the region if they were to give him a leadership role.<sup>104</sup> About a month after that meeting with the British, they gave him financial support and ammunition, and offered support for the establishment of a British-sanctioned administration in the region from Rawanduz north to Shamdinan that would be controlled by Taha II.<sup>105</sup> At the time, based on the accounts of British officers, Taha II remained as the kaimakam of Rawanduz;<sup>106</sup> however, by giving Taha II this administrative region, the British attempted to counterbalance the power Sheikh Mahmud of Sulaimaniya had over Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>107</sup> A report prepared in late 1920 by the Iranian authorities states that the British authorities planned to create an 'independent Kurdistan', and thus appointed Sayyid Taha II in order to convince the Kurdish tribes in Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan.<sup>108</sup> This report and other correspondence from the Ottoman archives show that the British propped up Taha II to expand his sphere of influence, and thus their own, north into Hakkari and possibly Van, but they were unable to have any effect north of Shamdinan; the Kurdish tribes and aghas had lost their appetite for fighting for a Kurdistan and the Ottoman government worked to block their expansion north using various tactics, including giving the title of *mir'ül ümera* and pasha to the tribal leaders and aghas.<sup>109</sup>

## Conclusion

Sayyid Taha II was a Kurdish religio-political leader important to the history of the quest for an independent Kurdistan. His status as a leader was the culmination of his life experiences; he spent his childhood in political exile, his adolescence struggling to maintain his family's leadership of their ancestral lands, and his adulthood attempting to solidify his political power for the benefit of a future Kurdistan during the First World War, ultimately forever changing the region's political landscape. Although with each stage of his life came greater difficulty, he was able to learn from and adapt to each hardship, turning adversity into advantage. Taha II's success was due, in part, to his ability to quickly learn the native language of each new regional power, in addition to their political and cultural norms. Inheriting his political position from his grandfather, Sheikh Ubeydullah, Taha II expanded the importance and influence of religio-political leadership in Kurdistan, which reached its pinnacle during the First World War. Taha II's work as a religio-political leader significantly influenced others who adopted a similar style, including Sheikh Mahmud Barzinji, Sayyid Abdulkadir, and later Sheikh Said. In addition to Sayyid Taha II, other leaders of the region, such as Sharif Husain of Hijaz, Emir Faisal of Iraq, and King Abdullah of Jordan, exhibited a similar prototypical style of leadership that was emerging from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East and eventually became commonplace. Despite the innovative work of these regional leaders, the architects of the post-First World War new order, primarily the British and French, had the final word concerning who would play a leadership role and where.

To Sayyid Taha II the Ottoman Eastern frontier represented a space of opportunity, both for himself and the Kurdish population. Together with other local Kurdish leaders and with the fickle support of various states fighting for control of the region, Taha II spread the idea and inspiration for the creation of an independent Kurdistan throughout the frontier region. Sayyid Taha II became the intermediary between the architects of the post-war order (British and French) and the local Kurdish population, while continuing to foster the hope for an independent or autonomous Kurdistan. After the First World War, the modern states that were emerging from the remains of the former Ottoman Empire struggled to build precise boundaries, both geographically and in the minds of the populations. The Turks, British, and Russians used religious ideology in an attempt to control local populations and to maintain separation of the Muslim and non-Muslim populations. Following suit, Sayyid Taha II used religious ideology to oppose the Turks, British, and Russians, and to gather support among the Kurds for the creation of a Kurdistan. The post-Ottoman, post-First-World-War newly created state borders were totally illogical to the Kurds of the region, who ultimately did not recognize them and continued to travel and cross them at will. Sayyid Taha II's political work and results show that borders of the Ottoman East and the region's religious doctrines were fragile and transient. Over time, the regional powers that operated in the Ottoman East shifted borders and allegiances, but Sayyid Taha II managed time and time again to adapt to them effectively in order to pursue his dream of a regional Kurdistan.

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## ORCID

Metin Atmaca  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4792-9592>

## Notes

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2. Sabri Ateş, 'In the Name of the Caliph and the Nation: The Sheikh Ubeidullah Rebellion of 1880–81', *Iranian Studies* Vol.47 (2014), pp.735–98.
3. For more details on Sheikh Ubeidullah rebellion, see Fırat Kılıç, 'Sheikh Ubeidullah's Movement' (Unpublished MA thesis, Bilkent University, 2003); see Celilê Celil, *1880 Şeyh Ubeydullah Nehri Kürt Ayaklanması*, M. Aras (trans.) (Istanbul: Peri Yayınları, 1998); Mehemed Hama Baqî, *Şureşê Şêx Ubeydullayê Nehrî (1880) Le Belgenamêyê Qacar da [Sheikh Ubeidullah Nehri Revolt (1880) in Qajar Documents]* (Arbil, Iraq: Çapxaneyê Wezaretê Perwerde, 2000); Eskendar Qurians, *Qiyam-e Sheikh Ubeidullah Shamzini dar Ahd-e Shah Naser al-Din [Sheikh Ubeidullah Revolt in the Age of Shah Nase al-Din]*, Abdallah Mardukh (ed.) (Tehran: Donya-ye Danesh, 1356).
4. Ottoman sources indicate that Muhammad Sadiq stayed away from politics and dedicated himself to improving the quality of life in his region. The Ottomans did not miss the opportunity to use this occasion to keep him quiet and rewarded him for building roads and bridges in the Nehri region. Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (BOA-Ottoman Archives of the Prime Ministry of Turkey), DH.MKT.2108, 14, 3.Ca.1316 (19 September 1898); The British Council at Van, Captain F.R. Maunsell reported that in the autumn of 1900, Sayyid Sadiq attempted to meet the Shah in order to obtain the restoration of villages in Tirgever, which Iran had confiscated from his father in 1881. The Ottomans naturally disapproved strongly of this expedition and forced him to return to Nehri. The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA), Foreign Office (FO) 195/3082 in A.L.P. Burdett, *Records of the Kurds: Territory, Revolt and Nationalism, 1831–1979*, Vol. 4, Cambridge Archive Editions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp.74–5.
5. Robert Elliott Speer, *The Hakim Sahib' The Foreign Doctor: A Biography of Joseph Plumb Cochran, M. D., of Persia* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1911), p.74.
6. One short article about Sayyid Taha II was written by Nazmi Sevgen, a researcher who worked for the Turkish Army during the Republican Period and attempted to minimize Sayyid Taha II's role in the First World War. Sevgen refers to Sayyid Taha II as a 'false sayyid' because of his family lineage, and as a 'traitor' because he fought the CUP and Kemalist regimes. Moreover, Sevgen describes Sayyid Taha II's homeland as a center where political conspiracies were designed. Nazmi Sevgen, 'Seyyid Taha', *Tarih Konuşuyor*, Vol.7 (May 1967), p.3165.
7. Sherif Pasha, for instance, presented a memorandum to the Peace Conference of 1919 with references to historical accounts in order to prove that the Kurds were an ancient people of the region. Cherif Pacha, *Mémorandum sur les Revendications du peuple kurde* (Paris: Imprimerie A.G. L'hoir, 1919), pp.5–7. On the other hand, Emin Ali Bedirhan protested against Armenian claims and found Sherif Pasha's map covering fewer parts of Kurdish regions, which excluded most of northeastern Anatolia, and thus presented a more inclusive one. TNA, FO 371/5068/4396, 20 March 1920 as cited in Hakan Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), p.40.
8. Michael A. Reynolds, 'Abdürrezzak Bedirhan: Ottoman Kurd and Russophile in the Twilight of Empire', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* Vol.12 (2011), pp.411–50.
9. Kamal Mazhar Aḥmad, *Kurdistan during the First World War* (London: Saqi Books, 1994), pp.66–7.
10. Wigram was there around 1910 and he estimates the age of Sayyid Taha as 19. That makes the year of his birth around 1891–2. W.A. Wigram and E.T.A. Wigram, *The Cradle of Mankind: Life in Eastern Kurdistan* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1914), p.165. Nazmi Sevgen gives 1878 as the year for his birth but provides no source for this information. Besides, he claims that his father Muhammad Sadiq died in 1903, whereas most sources agree on the year of 1911. Sevgen, 'Seyyid Taha', pp.3165–67.
11. Several Qajar documents in Baqî's documentary book refer to Sayyid Sadiq and the degree of his involvement in the 1880 revolt. Mehemed Hama Baqî, *Şureşê Şêx Ubeydullayê Nehrî (1880) Le Belgenamêyê Qacar da [Sheikh Ubeidullah Nehri Revolt (1880) in Qajar Documents]* (Arbil, Iraq: Çapxaneyê Wezaretê Perwerde, 2000), pp.154, 183, 295, 227.
12. During his exile in Mecca, Sayyid Abdulkadir sent letters along with pilgrims to the ulama in Nehri and other parts of Kurdistan exchanging news about the political situation in the region. DH.MKT.1971, 47, 18.Z.1309 (13 July 1892) and DH.MKT.1946, 91, 13.L.1309 (10 May 1892).

13. Abdulhamid was very suspicious of Sheikh al-Islam, and thus used all means in order to keep them under his order. Some of them like Hayrullah Efendi were dismissed and sent into exile to Medina. The Sultan's favorite tool against opponents was banishment based on the Ottoman Penal Code. As places of exile, he preferred provinces far away from the capital and where the exile could remain under surveillance. François Georgeon, *Abdulhamid II: Le sultan calife* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), pp.156–7. Apparently not only the Ottomans, but also the Mughals used Mecca as a convenient place of exile for political offenders, especially those who could be possible contenders for the throne. Naimur Rahman Farooqi, *Mughal-Ottoman Relations: A Study of Political & Diplomatic Relations between Mughal India and the Ottoman Empire, 1556–1748* (New Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 1989), p.128. On Mecca and Medina being an intellectual hub in the second half of the nineteenth century for trans-imperial Muslim scholars from around the world, see Seema Alawi's excellent work: *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).
14. BOA, BEO, 309323, 07.M.1331 (17 December 1912).
15. BOA, BEO, 310096, 10.S.1331 (19 January 1913).
16. Sayyid Taha had close relations with Abdurrezzak, a member of the Bedirkhani family who was backed by the Russians, and with Ismail Simko Agha, the leader of the Shikak tribe on the Iranian side. Both figures were active through the First World War and its aftermath. For the Ottoman documents on the relationship between Sayyid Taha II and aforementioned figures, see BOA, BEO, 313374, 27.C.1331 (3 June 1913); BOA, BEO, 310387, 24.C.1331 (31 May 1913); BOA, BEO, 318329, 06.S.1332 (4 January 1914) and for his contact with the Russians, see BOA, BEO, 316735, 19.Za.1331 (20 October 1913); BOA, BEO, 318351, 07.S.1332 (5 January 1914).
17. Wigram and Wigram, *The Cradle of Mankind*, pp.166–7.
18. BOA, DH.EUM.2.Şb, 24, 25.N.1332 (8 May 1916).
19. BOA, BEO, 322900, 26.N.1332 (9 May 1916).
20. W.R. Hay, *Two Years in Kurdistan: Experiences of a Political Officer, 1918–1920* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1921), p.353. British officer A.M. Hamilton, who was stationed in Iraq in the early 1920s, states that Sayyid Taha II spoke very good English. A.M. Hamilton, *Road Through Kurdistan: Travels in Northern Iraq* (London: Latimer Trend & Co, 1958), p.76.
21. Wigram and Wigram, *The Cradle of Mankind*, p.165.
22. Hamilton, *Road Through Kurdistan*, p.76.
23. Muzafer İlhan Erdost, *Şemdinli Rôportajı* (Istanbul: Onur Yayınları, 1987), p.45.
24. Wigram and Wigram, *The Cradle of Mankind*, p.165.
25. Edmonds says that Sayyid Taha II's style was unique to him: 'S. Taha's costume is in the central style, but the head-dress is his own national knitted "Balaclava" and the short jacket over the choghe is unusual.' C.J. Edmonds, *Kurds, Turks and Arabs: Politics, Travel and Research in North-eastern Iraq, 1919--1925* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), p.90.fn.
26. Edmonds, *Kurds, Turks and Arabs*, p.306.
27. Wigram and Wigram, *The Cradle of Mankind*, p.165.
28. Edmonds, *Kurds, Turks and Arabs*, p.306.
29. Hamilton, *Road Through Kurdistan*, p.75.
30. Not only the Russians but also the British tried to make the Kurdish leaders work together for their interest. During the second half of the First World War and afterwards, they sought to bring Sheikh Mahmud of Sulaimaniya, Sayyid Taha II and Simko Agha together, however with no result. Derk Kinnane, *The Kurds and Kurdistan* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p.38. Also see Cipher sent by Cabir Pasha, the Commander of Eleventh Army Corps in Van, to the Ministry of Interior. BOA. BEO., 302848. 1.Za.1330 (18 October 1912).
31. For the best work on Abdurrezzak Bedirkhan's relationship with Russia and his leadership, see Reynolds, 'Abdurrezzak Bedirhan'. An earlier work by the Soviet period historian Celilê Celil contains valuable information from the Russian archives and secondary literature: Celilê Celil, *19. Yüzyılın Sonu 20. Yüzyılın Başı Kürt Aydınlanması [Kurdish Enlightenment in the Late 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century]*, Arif Karabağ (trans.) (Istanbul: Avesta, 2000).
32. Some of the excellent examples of works on Kurdish history, culture, literature and society are produced by the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian Kurdologues. *Chêref-Nâmeh de*

- Charaf-khân Bidlîsî*, 6 Vols., F.B. Charmoy, (trans. and comment) (St. Petersburg: MM. Eggers et Comps, 1868–1873); Alexandre Jaba, *Recueil de notices et récits kurdes* (St. Petersburg: MM. Eggers et Comps, 1860); Basile Nikitine, *Les Kurdes: étude sociologique et historique* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1956). For a general overview of Kurdology during the Soviet period, see M. Leezenberg, *Soviet Kurdology and Kurdish Orientalism* in M. Kemper and S. Conermann (eds.), *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp.86–102 and the same author's "A People Forgotten by History": Soviet Studies of the Kurds', *Iranian Studies* Vol. 48 (2015), pp.747–67; Ismet Cheriff Vanly, 'The Kurds in the Soviet Union' in Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Stefan Sperl (eds.), *The Kurds: A Contemporary Overview* (London: Routledge, 1992).
33. Michael A. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.60.
  34. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, p.47.
  35. David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), p.102.
  36. McDowall, *The Kurds*, pp.102, 111–2.
  37. Reynolds, 'Abdürrezzak Bedirhan', p.448. Execution of rebellious leaders was not common during the regime of Abdulhamid II. In fact, throughout all the Ottoman administration, Kurdish leaders were either sent into exile or incorporated into the bureaucracy and appointed to a high-level position in other provinces, whereas CUP and Kemalist regimes became much more brutal towards the leaders of rebellious groups, including Arabs, Albanians and Caucasians, and executions with fast track trials through *Divan-ı Harb* became a common practice. Some of the Kurdish leaders who were executed by the Ottoman and Republican administrations: Molla Selim (1914), Sayyid Ali (1914), Sheikh Şehabettin (1914) Sheikh Abdulselam Barzani (1914), Sayyid Abdulkadir (1925), and Sheikh Said (1925).
  38. Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables*, p.93.
  39. G. R. Driver, *Kurdistan and the Kurds* (Mount Carmel: G. S. I. Printing Section, 1919), p.106.
  40. Reynolds, 'Abdürrezzak Bedirhan', p.427.
  41. For more information on Simko Agha, see Kamal Soleimani, 'The Kurdish Image in Statist Historiography: The Case of Simko', *Middle Eastern Studies* Vol.53 (2017), pp.949–65; Mihemed Resûl Hawar, *Simko Axayê Şikakî û Tevgera Neteweyî ya Kurd [Simko Agha of Shikak and the Kurdish National Movement]*, Ziya Avci (trans.) (Istanbul: Nubihar, 2016); Aḥmad Chupani, *Mas'alah-yi Ismail Agha Simku dar Azarbayjan va Mukriyan [The Question of Ismail Agha Simko in Azerbaijan and Mukriyan]* (Tehran: Nashr-i Ana, 1394).
  42. Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006), p.176.
  43. Jordi Tejel Gorgas, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil: continuités et discontinuités du nationalisme kurde sous le mandat français en Syrie et au Liban (1925–1946)* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), pp.66fn, 129.
  44. Both leaders met each other in 1928 in Iran. Gorgas, *Le mouvement kurde*, p.251.
  45. Dated 21 October 1912, in his telegram from Van to the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Said-i Kurdi stated that he knew Sayyid Taha well, that he served his people greatly, that he lost most of his property because of mismanagement and if he was not forgiven because of his actions, big trouble would await eastern Anatolia. BOA, BEO, 302848, 9.Za.1330 (21 October 1912) cited in Fatih Ünal, 'Rusların Kürt Aşiretlerini Osmanlı Devleti'ne Karşı Kullanma Çabaları', *Karadeniz Araştırmaları* Vol.5 (2008), pp.133–52.
  46. Sevgen, 'Sayyid Taha', p.3167.
  47. Erdost recorded some details on Sayyid Taha II from the first witnesses who lived in Nehri. In his account, it seems that Sayyid Taha II tried to convince the Kurdish tribes of the Shamdinan area to join him and include Nehri in the territories of Iraq under the administration of the British. However, he was unsuccessful in his venture and left Nehri in 1920 for good. Erdost, *Şemdinli Rôportajı*, p.44–9. See also BOA, DH.ŞFR. 638 81, 22 Temmuz 1335 (22 July 1919).
  48. For instance, one cipher from the governor of Van sent on 28 Mayıs 1335 stated that Sayyid Taha was considered a 'dangerous' (*muzır*) person by the British, thus was 'isolated' (*nefy ve tecrid*) (BOA, DH.ŞFR. 632 58, 28 Mayıs 1335–28 May 1919), while another cipher that was sent

- a couple of weeks later by the same governor stated that he was 'convinced' (*elde edildiği*) by the British in order to work for them (BOA, DH.ŞFR. 633 136, 10 Haziran 1335–10 June 1919).
49. *Tigeyashtini Raste*, 12 January 1918, in Mazhar Aḥmad, *Kurdistan During the First World War*, pp.107–8.
  50. *Tigeyashtini Raste*, 20 May 1918.
  51. *Tigeyashtini Raste*, 1 January 1918.
  52. *Tigeyashtini Raste*, 12 February and 22 April 1918.
  53. *Tigeyashtini Raste*, 12 January 1918.
  54. McDowall, *The Kurds*, p.103.
  55. Mazhar Aḥmad, *Kurdistan During the First World War*, p.157.
  56. Soleimani also highlights the role of the sectarian division in the Kurdish regions of Iran during the First World War and states 'A binary of *Sunni* Kurds vs. Iranians and non-Kurdish *Shi'a* was the operative dichotomy employed by both Kurds and non-Kurds.' Soleimani, 'The Kurdish Image in Statist Historiography', p.956.
  57. BOA. DH. KMS., 19/27, Lef 2. 5.Ca.1332 (1 April 1914) letter from the governor of Van to the Ministry of Interior; also BOA. DH. KMS., 21/55, Lef 3/1, cited in Fatih Ünal, 'Rusların Kürt Aşiretlerini', p.149.
  58. BOA. DH. SYS., 24/2-4, Lef 112–113 cited in Fatih Ünal, 'Rusların Kürt Aşiretlerini', pp.144–5.
  59. Dispatch of Shirkov, 24 March 1914 [6 April 1914], AVPRI (Foreign Affairs Archive of the Russian Empire), f. 180, d. 1406, ll. 5, 7 cited in Reynolds, 'Abdürrezzak Bedirhan', pp.443–4.
  60. Janet Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), p.162.
  61. AVPRI, Telegram from Chirkov, 30.5.1913 [12.4.1913], f. 180, o. 517/2 d. 3573, l. 158 cited in Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, p.64.
  62. Arshak Safrastian, *Kurds and Kurdistan* (London: The Harvill Press, 1948), p.74.
  63. Safrastian, *Kurds and Kurdistan*, p.74.
  64. M.A. Zaki estimates that out of all these Kurdish recruits, 300,000 of them fell victim to the war. Muhammad Amin Zaki, *Khulasat Tarikh al-Kurd wa Kurdistan min Aqdam al-'Usur Hatta al-'An* [A Concise History of the Kurds and Kurdistan from the Ancient Periods until Today], Muhammad Ali Awni (trans.) (Cairo: al-Sa'ada Press, 1939), pp.274–5; Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement*, p.125.
  65. McDowall, *The Kurds*, p.103.
  66. Mazhar Aḥmad, *Kurdistan During the First World War*, p.91; on the desertion and defection from the Ottoman Army, see also: Erik-Jan Zürcher, 'Between Death and Desertion: The Experience of the Ottoman Soldier in World War I', *Turcica* Vol.28 (1996), pp.235–58.
  67. According to the British records, Simko's sources included 200 Kurdish-Ottoman officers. Eastern Reports, TNA, CAB/24/129. Not 4 5. 2 November 1921, p.574; whereas Othman Ali claims that as many as 3000 Ottoman army deserters joined Simko's militias. Othman Ali, *Dirasat fi al-Harakah al-Kurdiya al-Mu'asirah (1833–1946)* [Studies on the Modern Kurdish Movement (1833–1946)] (Arbil: Maktab al-Tafsir, 2003), p.344; both sources are cited from Soleimani, 'The Kurdish Image in Statist Historiography', p.954.
  68. McDowall, *The Kurds*, pp.100–1.
  69. Siddiq Damaluji, *Bahdinin al-Kurdiya Aw Imarat al-'Amadiya* [The Kurdish Bahdinin or Emirate of Amadiya] (Mosul: al-Ittihad al-Jadida Press, 1952), p.94, cited in Mazhar Aḥmad, *Kurdistan During the First World War*, p.67.
  70. Mazhar Aḥmad, *Kurdistan During the First World War*, p.67.
  71. McDowall, *The Kurds*, p.99.
  72. Communiqué of vice-consul of France in Van to M. Bompard, Ambassador of France in Constantinople. Centre des Archives diplomatiques de Nantes, Ministère des Affaires étrangères, France (CADN), 166PO/E, No. 19, 11 June 1914.
  73. Communiqué of vice-consul of France in Van to M. Bompard, Ambassador of France in Constantinople. CADN, 166PO/E/133, No. 10, 10 May 1914.
  74. From the Ottoman Gendarmarie to the Ambassador of France in Constantinople. CADN, 166PO/E/133, 4 April 1914.

75. Telegraph from the Ottoman Ambassador Emin Bey. BOA. BEO., 309556. 6.M.1331 (16 December 1912).
76. The document to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs after Shahbandar of Urumiya sent a telegraph. BOA, BEO. 318351, 7. S. 1332 (5 January 1914).
77. Cipher sent by the governor of Van, Tahsin Bey, to the Ministry of Interior. BOA. DH. KMS., 9/26, Lef 8–9. 6.Ra.1332 (29 January 1914).
78. From Ambassador of France in Constantinople to Paris. CADN, 166PO/E/133, 5 April 1914.
79. Cipher from the Ottoman Embassy in Tehran to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, BOA, DH.ŞFR. 45.241. 21.Za.1332 (11 October 1914).
80. Basil Nikitine, 'Les Kurdes racontés par eux-mêmes', *L'Asie française* Vol.25 (1925), pp.148–57.
81. *Parliamentary Papers: The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915–16* (London, 1916), cited in McDowall, *The Kurds*, p.103.
82. Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement*, p.126.
83. McDowall states some 200,000 Christians (Armenians and Assyrians) abandoned their lands and followed the Russian army to further north. McDowall, *The Kurds*, p.105.
84. McDowall, *The Kurds*, p.103.
85. Uğur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913–1950* (Oxford University Press, 2012), p.117; Nikitine, *Les Kurdes*, p.196; Celadet Ali Bedirxan states that the directorate for the refugees in Istanbul at the time recorded the same number Nikitine presents. Celadet Ali Bedirxan, *Kürt Sorunu Üzerine [On the Kurdish Question]* (Istanbul: Avesta, 1997), p.18. Sharif Pasha states that 900,000 Kurds were deported and dispersed among Istanbul, Konya, Ankara, Adana, and Izmir. He adds 'half of them perished in terrible misery while the other half is about to perish in the same conditions'. Sharif Pasha's letter to the British Government, TNA, FO, 608–95, 3 August 1919. Although the Settlement of Refugees Statute (*İskân-ı Muhâcirin Nizâmnamesi*) was in place until 1916, a new ordinance was issued by the General Directorate for Tribes and Refugees (*Aşair ve Muhâcirin Müdiriyyet-i Umumiyyesi*) for those refugees who were displaced by the Russian occupation of the Eastern provinces. Serhat Bozkurt, 'The Kurds and Settlement Policies from the Late Ottoman Empire to Early Republican Turkey: Continuities and Discontinuities (1916–34)', *Iranian Studies* Vol.47 (2014), pp.823–37.
86. Bozkurt, 'The Kurds and Settlement', p.832.
87. Edward W. C. Noel, *Diary of Major Noel on Special Duty in Kurdistan* (Basra: Government Press, 1920), pp.54–5.
88. BOA, DH.ŞFR. 551.11. 09.N. 1333 (9 April 1917).
89. BOA, DH.ŞFR. 554 78, 19.M. 1333 (19 May 1917).
90. BOA, DH.ŞFR. 43.218, 18.N. 1332 (1 May 1916).
91. BOA, DH.ŞFR. 556 62, 7.H. 1333 (7 June 1917).
92. For instance, after the war ended, the governor of Van wrote a very polished résumé of Sayyid Taha II filled with his service to the Ottoman army during the war, and thus asked the government to reward him with money. BOA, DH.ŞFR.621.27 16 Mayıs 1335 (16 May 1919).
93. Report prepared by Khoy Agency (*Kargozari*), sent through Azerbaijani Agency, Archives of Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, no.394, 16 Jumada al-Awwal 1337, 37-42-19 cited in Kavah Bayat, *Ravabit-i Iran va Turkiyah: az Suqut-i Dawlat-i Usmani ta bar'Amadan-i Nizam-i Jumhuri (1297–1302 Shamsi) [Relations of Iran and Turkey: from the Demise of the Ottoman State to the Rise of the Republic (1297–1302 Shamsi)]* (Tehran: Pardis-i Danish, 1394), pp.28–9.
94. M.S. Lazarev, *Emperyalizm ve Kürt Sorununun (1917–1923) [Imperialism and the Kurdish Question (1917–1923)]*, Mehmet Demir (trans.) (Ankara: Özge Yayınları, 1993), p.21.
95. Abdülhalük M. Çay and Yaşar Kalfa, *Doğu ve Güneydoğu Anadolu'da Kuvay-ı Milliye Hareketleri [The National Forces Movements in East and Southeast Anatolia]* (Ankara: Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü, 1990), p.32.
96. Nikitine, *Les Kurdes*, p.195; Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement*, p.129.
97. Gertrude Margaret Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia* (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1920), p.65.
98. BOA, DH.KMS. 19 38, 27.Ca.1332 (23 April 1914).

99. BOA, DH.ŞRF.65.41 18.Ş.1334 (18 February 1918) and BOA, DH.ŞRF.65.113 26.Ş.1334 (26 February 1918).
100. McDowall, *The Kurds*, p.107.
101. Kenneth Mason, 'Central Kurdistan', *The Geographical Journal* Vol.6 (1919), pp.329–47.
102. Zaki, *Khulasat Tarikh al-Kurd*, p.280.
103. BOA, DH.ŞFR.624.134, 6 Nisan 1335 (6 April 1919).
104. BOA, DH.ŞFR. 632 72, 13 Mayıs 1335 (6 May 1919).
105. BOA, DH.ŞFR. 635 27, 22 Haziran 1335 (22 June 1919).
106. Hamilton, *Road Through Kurdistan*, pp.74, 194.
107. BOA, DH.ŞFR. 636 8, 2 Temmuz 1335 (2 July 1919).
108. Archives of Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 43-10-42, 11 Safar 1339.
109. BOA, DH.ŞFR. 638 45, 20 Temmuz 1335 (20 July 1919).