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Religion Impacts on the Kurdish National Movement and Their Relations in 1880-1914: with Undertaking Several British Traveller Outlooks

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Abstract

This research focuses on the religious impacts on the Kurdish national movement in 1880-1914 when most of the Kurdish leaders were religiously inspired. The British travelogue accounts are considered as Britain had an important role in the area. The religious factors are addressed in both internal and external aspects in order to find out how religion affected the Kurdish unity and how this shaped the Kurdish relationship with others for both local and western powers. It is concluded that religious aspects to some extent had a negative impact on the Kurdish national movement and its relationship to the outdoor powers.

Keywords: Religion, Kurds, Nationalism, Ottomans, British Travellers

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1- Introduction

One of the most prominent phenomena in the history of the Kurds was the religious aspect which played an important role in the Kurdish national movement. Particularly, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as the number of the religious leaders and sheikhs were highly increased who could participate in the political decisions and become leaders of rebellions (Bruinessen, 1992:23-24). Thus, religious aspects beside the politic became an element of Kurdish demand in the Kurdish nationalism and Kurdish unity (McDowall, 1996:12). In this regard, a sufficient of the European scholars, particularly British travellers, whether missionaries or politicians, who were a mirror of the British policy in the region, represented a part of religious characteristics in Kurdistan in that period (Ahmed, 1994:12). Moreover, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is known as the most prominent period of the British travellers in Kurdistan (O'Shea, 2007)

Along with the historical works written on this field of research as the main research methodology, this study also examines several of those travellers' points of view in religious influences on the Kurds' nationalism and the Kurdish relationship with both, local and international authorities in the frame of both internal and external effects.

The purpose is to figure out that the Kurds were represented whether by their national elements or by religion, and how this representation affected the relationship between the Kurds and the others, particularly the western powers most likely Britain as the

main western authority in Kurdistan. Moreover, how this relationship would be significant for the Kurdish nationalism and political decision making.

This paper consists of several parts; first of all it gives a brief historical background of the religions in Kurdistan; explaining the relationship between Muslims and Christians which they have had a long history together in Kurdistan. After that the main parts of this research address the religious impacts on the Kurdish national and political movement in both internal and external sides. Finally, a conclusion is given. To be mentioned that a sort of several travellers views are examined in the sections of this paper as primary sources.

Bearing in mind that, in principal all religions and religious groups and their followers that are mentioned in this paper are respectful in the author's perspective, however the way of using them is addressed with their impacts.

2- A Brief Historical Background of Religions in Kurdistan

In the Kurds' religion, the majority of the Kurds were Muslims, had been divided into both Sunni and Shi'i doctrines. The majority of the Kurds in Ottoman Empire were Sunni. This is likely due to the Ottoman authority run by Sunni Caliphs. The Kurds who belonged to Persia were mostly Shi'i because; Shi'ism was the main doctrine in Persia (Bruinessen, 1992:23). Thus, mainly, Kurds were inspired by these two Empires in relation to religious division. The other prominent religion groups in Kurdistan were the Jewish, Christian, Ahl Alhaq (Kakaies), Sarahli and Nestorian Christians were living in Kurdistan (Malla 2005:27). A large amount of the Kurds were also Kizilbashis (Alevi), who were "heretical Muslims with pro-Christian leanings" (Buxton et al., 1914:269). Likewise, there are Yazidi Kurds, who have a totally different religious spirit

from Muslims and Christians (Bell 1911:269). The Yezidi Religion is a synthesis of old pagan elements, Zoroastrian dualist elements overlaid with Jewish, Christian and Muslim elements (McDowall 1996:11). As a result, there was a range of religious faiths in Kurdistan. Moreover, the main purpose of this section is only to show the various numbers of religions and religious groups in Kurdistan in order to find out how this religious diversity affected the Kurdish national movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century which is discussed in detail in the following parts of this paper.

3 – Muslim and Christian Relationship in the View of Several British Travellers

The western travellers widely presented religious aspects in the region as there were missionaries made their observation among the religious sects, mostly the relationship between Muslim Kurds and Christians around them. For example, Rev. W. A. Wigram ⁽¹⁾ some before 1914, who observed among the Christian Kurds, widely showed that relationship.(Mason, 1919) As well as Noel Boxton (1914:2) ,who portrayed the relationship between those religious groups, particularly the Kurds with Christians as a large section in the region , saw the Kurds as the riskiest quarter to the Christians. In addition, O'Shea (2007:76) made a claim on travellers' view and says that "they often viewed the Kurds unfavourably in relation to their Christian neighbours" However, there were Christians who lived securely in Kurdistan, as Mason (1919:229) a British traveller reports that "fewer of us know that a very large section of Christians in pre-war days lived quite happily in Kurdistan". This relation could depend on the different religious categories among the Kurds and the tribal system, so that several like and others dislike Christians. Therefore; this indicates the

religious issues among the Kurds themselves, which probably led the problems, get larger in front of the Kurds' fate.

4- Internal Religious Influence on the Kurds' National Movement

It could be worth to know how religiously affected the Kurds fate and Kurds movement, this would come out from, first the religious divisions between Kurdish tribes to different religious groups, for example Shi'i and Sunni and other religious schools which were common such as Hanafi and Shafi'i schools. (McDowall 1996:11) There were other common phenomena of faithfulness to religious brotherhood such as Naqishbandiya and Qadiriya who practiced their religions in different forms of devotion to each other. (McDowall 1992:13). This could influence the Kurdish integrity as an internal factor. There had always been the rivalries among those groups. As McDowall (1996:11) claims that "certain religious-minded Sunni Kurds have sided with non-Kurdish Sunnis against heterodox Kurds, and in parts of Turkey continue to do so". In the Kurdish religious framework, there could be the individuality in religious practices in Kurdistan. For instance, in Sufi brotherhood, which was seen as unconventional practice, ecstatic utterances, trances, fire-eating⁽²⁾ and self-mutilation were popular among the different religious groups.

There were also a large number of Sheikhs in different order, or even in the same order that had always competed to structure their client associations which would represent their authority. In this respect, McDowall (1996:12) gives an example and says that "A classic example is the conflict between two Naqshbandi dynasties the sayyds of [Nehri] and the Shaykhes of neighbouring Barzan in the second half of the nineteenth century".

In this regard, British Travellers mentioned this various number of religions, and each one had its own way of religious practicing; this difference was not only between the tribes but also between small villages which affected a Kurdish national confederation. One example is that Dickson (1910:360) as a British traveller, who travelled through Kurdistan, in the early twentieth century, points out that in several districts in Kurdistan, such as Arnost Malat and Harki Oramar that "Peoples. -Like most other parts of Turkey, these districts are in-habited by races of varying nationalities and religious denominations, each separate village maintaining its own characteristics independent of its next-door neighbour". He also emphasises the higher domination religious phenomenon than the nationality among people says that "In Turkey, people are known by their religion and not by their nationality". (Dickson, 1910:361) In this point Dickson, as a traveller and a geographer, only gives a description of the religious proportion and diversity and does not point out its reason and how this affected the Kurds' nationalism. Additionally, in this regard Buxton (1914:9) gives a similar opinion. However, in the historical point of view, this is probably due to the variety of Sheikhs and their strong manipulate efforts of the people to be their followers. This was a reality of religious Sheikhs who had an influential characteristic among their followers by their personal charisma, which deeply rooted in the peoples' mind. (Bruinessen, 1992:208). This would lead a kind of partition of people and make reluctant to cooperate each other, because "Shaikhs have different categories of followers or subjects whose loyalties to them are also different"(Bruinessen, 1992:208).

Thus, some internal dilemmas had been made by different religious ideas which could prevent the improvement of the Kurdish nationalism movement and their confederation, and also probably avoided the Kurdish success to make their policy in the

Ottoman Empire. For example, most of the Kurdish Hamidiye ⁽³⁾ cavalry was structured by the Sunni doctrine that could become a risk to the other Kurdish religious sects who did not aside the Ottomans. (Olson 1989:11) In this way, the Ottoman's Sultan supported Hamidiye Kurds, as McDowall (1992:11) reported that "they were unlikely to be punished for depredations against villagers, whether these were Christians or Muslims, Armenian or Kurd". This indicates the weakness of the Kurdish religious unity in one hand and the Ottoman policy which was seen to be behind creating this weakness. The British traveller represented that the domination of religion influences the Kurds among the Kurdish tribes, for example Molyneux-Seel ⁽⁴⁾ (1914) explained that:

"The Dersimli have a tribal organization similar to other nomad Kurds, and have in all about forty-five tribes, some of which are quite small, being merely fragments of larger ones. The chiefs of the most important tribes are Sei'ds. These Sei'ds are religious chiefs, and hence exercise an un-bounded influence over the tribesmen". (p.52).

As a consequence, it is worth bearing in mind that the disputes between the Kurdish tribes could come from the various different religious groups among them, and each one had its special followers different from the others. In this regard, Sykes (1908:453) recorded that "some tribes are wholly' Moslem, others wholly Christian (Jacobite sect), others Devil worshippers, others contain adherents of all three religions".

Therefore, the outcome here is that the existence of various religious groups in the Kurdish community was a clear obstacle at the forefront of the Kurdish integration because it was not easy to join all these groups together, particularly, when the authority and leadership become more specific to a group .For example, the only

powerful sect was Muslim Sheikhs whose demands were in the circle of their religions in a Kurdish community that was the home for many other religions and doctrines. It could be suggested that the Kurds could desire their rights in the frame of nationalism rather than religion. This will be more clearly shown in the following paragraphs.

5- External Religious Influence on the Kurds' National Movement

Another common emergence in that period was the Ottoman Pan-Islam as an external religious factor could have influence on the Kurdish nationalism. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the term of Pan-Islam had widely been used, in the Muslim World which was assumed as a new ideology of 'religio-political' through most of the historians' views. Ottoman Empire, as a large power among Muslims, took this responsibility to dominate over Islam and perhaps decline the Christians. (Oscan, 1997:23). In the first stage, Pan-Islam Germany supported it in order to place their position in the Muslim world, especially in the Middle East. (Rauf, 2007:20). By the same token, Britain also did not oppose to the Pan-Islam so as to prevent the Russian domination. Rauf (2007:20) gives the reason that it "was the need of a counter balance against Tsarist Russia which was slowly moving towards the east endangering the interests of Britain in the region".

However, Ottoman government took a wrong method of its expansion and authority against the none Muslim sects in particular, Christians, via starting by implementing several massacres in 1860, and Makdisi (2002:601) says that, in this year, "In July, Damascene Muslims rioted to protest deteriorating economic conditions, targeting and massacring several hundred of

the city's Christian population". This was combined into two events in Mount Lebanon and the riot in Damascus which create a certain European reaction. (Makdisi, 2002) Later on, a series of massacres came up such as Balkan, Bulgarian and then Armenian in 1890s; these all had brought the British reaction to the region. (Laycock, 2009:44)

The Ottoman policy clearly affected the relationship between the Kurds and the other minorities such as Armenian by religious meaning, and other religion groups in Kurdistan ,particularly ,Christians. For example, they used Kurds against Armenian in the religious form. This can be clearly seen in the traveller accounts; Buxton (1914:19) claims that "it was not till after the last Russo-Turkish war that Kurds were deliberately set against the Armenians. It fell to the genius of Sultan Abdul Hamid to conceive that, by means of religious animosity, a use could be found for them".

After the Young Turk Revolution, several changes had been made, in terms of the Ottoman Empire and it was considered as a starting point of reformation. For the Kurds, it was also a turning point because, a year later in 1899, Sultan Abdul Hamid's government collapsed, so the Hamidyie Kurds lose the Ottomans' support. However, it was the time for the other Kurds to establish their policy in order to propose their desires and provide them by the reformation. A Kurdish national movement was going ahead. Even though, it held a political position of Sheikh's thinking, in principle, it took a religious shape as well because it was headed by Sheikhs who strongly inspired by religion. (Jwaidah, 2006:107). For example, a petition had been forwarded to the Ottoman parliament by Sheikh Nuri Muhammad and Sheikh Abd al-Salam⁽⁵⁾ the Kurds' representatives. It demanded several rights for the Kurds which combine both the religious nationalist aspects together. This

petition was consisted of seven demands, three out of them were about religion. For example it demanded that the management of the justice and law should be based upon the Muslim Shari'a (Muslim canon law) as Islam was a position religion. Another desire was the rule of collection of taxes to be organised by Muslim Shari'a. The third demand was, "the position of *Qadi* (religious judge) and *mufti* (canon lawyer responsible for delivering formal legal opinions) to be filled by adherence Shafi'i school of law". (Jwaidah, 2006:107)

The main argument here to be drawn up is that the petition strongly represented a limited state of religion. If it was on behalf of the Kurds' opinion, all in all, then it only focused on the Muslim Shari'a so about the other non-Muslim religious sects could be as there was a large number of them. Another interesting point is that it only mentioned the school of Shafi'i which was a school for Sunni doctrine Muslims and at the same time there were other schools such as Hanafi and other doctrines like Shi'i who covered a large section of the Kurdish community. (McDowall, 1996:11)

Another indication given here is, for that period, the Kurds were of need to establish their national policy, rather than basing things on religious structure. Because it was obvious that Ottomans used the term of Pan-Islam to build up their policy particularly Sultan Abdul Hamid II, and the majority of the scholars in late nineteenth and early twentieth founded the failure of Abdul Hamid II's policy (Olson, 1989:14) who was recognised as the worst leader through the European view as brought many problems to the Christians. And Hiller (1983:2) reports that "it had become an unshaken belief that Abdul-Hamid was the worst ruler Europe had ever known". Hence, the religious struggle became the subject of discourse, and any movement based on religion, would probably not be supported in international policy. Yet, most of the Kurdish

movement run by Sheikhs who structured a part of their policy in the religious form which did not always give a hope of success. For instance, the rebellion of Shiekh Ubaydolla Nahri 1980 apparently was a religious rebellion, and the latter on the same form Sheik Said's rebellion, that the religious slogans were appeared stronger than the nationality in his desires (Olson, 1989:14). As a result, most of the British travellers were also politicians and they reported and worked for British government so they represented that the Kurds were more inspired by religion rather than nationality. And the British policy might not support any religious movements because they attempted to weekend the Ottoman Empire as the most powerful force of Islam which represented the Islam Caliphate. In this way, Britain tried to support the Kurds to build a sort of a Kurdish authority apart from Ottoman Empire and more likely to become a British colony (Eskander, 2000). This can also be applied for the other western policy powers, particularly, whose ally with Britain such as France. The point here is that, the western authority would not allow the other Islamic country to replace another one who they are trying to decline. The most appropriate example for this is the later on British policy which obviously supported for Kamal Ataturk who was 'Anti-Islamic' ideology (Yegan, 1999)

Therefore; it was more worth for the Kurds to stable their policy suitable with outdoor policy, particularly, those who had an important role in the region such as Britain because politically the relationship between the Kurds and the British authorities was going well. This is obviously presented in the British documents in the Indian office saying that "the political importance of our occupying Khaniqin ⁽⁵⁾ in order to maintain our interest and influence with the Kurdish tribes who were already well-disposed to us". (Indian Office 1920:44) Another point is that Britain should control the Ottoman Empire not to get stronger that it could affect

the British interests in the region. In this way, a reformation had been approached by Britain in the Ottoman Empire (Laycock 2009:8). One of this reformation parts came from the results of the Crimean war to make equality in the rights between Muslim and Christians. Laycock (2009:8) reports that "on paper these reforms appeared to grant Christian subjects the same rights as their Muslim neighbours, bringing end to religious discrimination and oppression".

Thus, it was potential for the Kurds, to take advantage of these situations in the way of building their relationship with other religious' sects in order to fulfil equality in the rights, in one hand, and placing their policy on international campaigns on the other hand. Because, In terms of the Ottomans' attitude towards the Kurds, it was clear that the Ottoman government prevented the Kurdish movement in any form whether to be religious or national. For example, when Abdul Hamid II created the Hamidiye Cavalry it was first to weaken the Kurdish national movement and another reason was to reduce the chiefs and Sheikh's power.(Olson, 1989:14) The British sources in the Indian office presented the Turks' outlook to the religious leaders saying that the Kurds "suffered severely under the impositions of the government; while their religious leaders, to whom they hold with singular tenacity, were subjected to humiliation and extortion".(Indian Office, 1920:43)

It could be asked that why the Ottoman government unlike Kurdish religious leaders, while they represented the Islam fundamentals and at the same time the Ottomans proclaimed the Pan-Islam. The reason could be that those religious leaders held both sides politic and religious, and any political movement would not be accepted by the Turkish authority. Thus, the Turks relationship with the Kurds was remaining temporary .It certainly

depended upon their needs to the Kurds, particularly in the wars, but when the operations finished, they left the Kurds ignored, in this regard British paper in the Indian office (1920) recorded that:

"In the early days of the war, before the Jihad campaign had been discredited, the Turks tried to draw from the Kurds levies of irregular horse. A small contingent went to Shu'aibah, but after serving well they were securely treated by the Turkish authorities. The Kurds then returned to their home and did not subsequently supply a single horseman against us"(p.43)

The Kurdish religious leaders' position was significant in relation to state, the political balance between Kurds and the other powers in the region and Ottoman government. Shortly before the Great War, when the Ottomans proclaimed Jihad, those religious leaders did not accept it, and the propaganda was a failure. This is also presented in the British official writings in Indian Office (1920) recorded that:

"The lack of success which attended Turkish propaganda was largely due to the action of the religious leaders. They unanimously refused to preach the Jihad and proclaimed the war to be one of self-aggrandisement on the part of the Turks, who were, they pointed out, the hereditary enemies of the Kurds".(p.43)

6- Conclusions

In conclusion, the Kurdish religious leaders practiced their role in shaping the political decision making in the Kurdish community. This also formed the relationship between the Kurds and other authorities in the region. This was a reason of the absence of Kurdish integration in that period. It has been figured out that the British traveller accounts that there were different religious groups even among one religion and had different doctrines and schools.

Each one portrayed itself as a Kurdish representative in political positions, and hence a rivalry had been made. This was a clear drawback of the religious aspects of the Kurdish national movement in the Kurds history as an internal factor. Those factors affected the relationship between the Kurds and Britain to be weekend, in the view of the British travellers and politicians, a sort of a Kurdish unity would be very difficult due to the various religious sects and each one carried a different ideology.

Another outcome is that, in the Kurdish community, the religious phenomenon was in a higher position than the nationality. This was due to the Kurdish rulers who were strongly inspired by religion.

It has also been figure out that in the external circumstances, regarding Pan-Islam and Jihad, as a drawback of religious influence on the Kurds , Ottoman Empire intensively proclaimed these two elements, and started with several massacres. This brought the British as well as European reaction desire a justice between Muslims and Christians by a reformation in the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, any Kurdish movement in religious forms would not provide a Kurdish success in international policy.

As a result, the Kurds should stable their position in international policy in the form of nationalism rather than religion. This does not mean that to alleviate the value of religions for individuals, but also to separate it from nationality in order to gather all sects and groups under a strong Kurdish unity.

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(1) Rev. W. A. Wigram: is a western missionary who travelled to Kurdistan in the early twentieth century and wrote about

religions in Kurdistan. For more information see his book: *The Cradle of Mankind Life in Eastern Kurdistan*, (London, 1914).

(2) According to David McDowall These practices are not peculiar to Kurdish society alone; they can be founded among other communities which prefer folk Islam to the formalized religion. But they are suggestive of pre-Islam religious rites and exercises peculiar to the society in which they take place, and may suggest some origins in common between Kurds belonging to different religious groups.

(3) Hamidiye Cavalry: This cavalry created by Sultan Abdul Hamid in November 1890 and used against Armenians. Taking their name from Abdul Hamid, the cavalry were known as the Hamidiye. The Hamidiye drew people from various backgrounds in the Ottoman Empire, but it was distinguished by being one of the first organized Kurdish units within the Ottoman Empire.

(4) Molyneux-Seel: was a British traveller in Kurdistan before 1914 who wrote about Kurds in Dersim under the title of (A Journey in Dersim) which is located in the northern Kurdistan.

(5) Born in Barzan village in 1887, Sheikh Abdulsalam was the older brother of Mulla Mustafa Barzani, the father of Masoud Barzani. Having studied Sufism, the mystical side of Islam, he became the leader of the Naqishbandi Sufi order after the death of his father In 1907, he sent a telegraph to the Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II, with the backing of Kurdish tribal leaders and sheikhs, demanding cultural and political rights for the Kurds. For more information see this link <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/141220181>

(6) Khaneqin: is a town which is located in the southern Kurdistan.

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پوخته:

ئەم لیکۆلینە وەیه باس لە کاریگەرییە ئاینییەکان دەکات لەسەر بزوووتنە وەدی نەتە وایەتی کورد و پەيوەندیەکانی لە سالانی ۱۸۸۰-۱۹۱۴. کە لە و ماوەیەدا لەتەک بیری نەتە وایەتی لایەنی ئاینیش دەوریکێ کاریگەری هەبوو لەسەر کورد. کە زۆریەدی دەسلەتدارەکان و سەرکردەدی شۆرشەکان کەسانی ئاینی بوون. لێرەدا تۆماری هەندیک لە گەریدە بەریتانییەکان بەهەند وەرگیراوە، ئەوکاتە بەریتانیا پۆلیکی بالای هەبوو لە ناوچە کەدا، هەولداراوە کاریگەرییەکانی ئاین دیاری بکریت، لەسەر ئاستی ناوخۆی کورد و دەرەکی کە پەيوەندی هەیه بە جموجۆلی

بهريتانيا و دهسهلاتى عوسمانى. ئەمەش بۆ ئەوى ديارى بکريت که ئاين چۆن کارى کردووته سەر يه کگرتنى کورد و پهيوهنديهکانى کورد له گهڵ ههريه که له دهسهلاته ههريمييهکان و هيزه رۆژئاوايييهکان له ناوچه که. ئەم ليکۆلينه وهيه به شيويهيه کى گشتى به و ئەنجامه دهگات که لايهنى ئاينى له ههنديک رووه وه کاريهگهريه کى نهرينى کردووته سەر بزووتنه وهى نه ته وهى کوردى و پهيوهنديهکانى له گهڵ هيزه دهره کيييهکان.

ملخص:

يدرس هذا البحث تأثير الدين على الحركة الوطنية الكوردية وعلاقتها ما بين سنة ١٨٨٠-١٩١٤ كان للدين فى ذلك الحين الى جانب الفكر الوطنى دور مؤثر على الكورد. حيث كان اكثر الحكام وقادة الثورات هم شيوخ و شخصيات دينية. هنا اهتم البحث بمدونات الرحالة البريطانيين لدور بريطانيا المهم فى المنطقة آنذاك . مبينا بالتحديد تأثيرات الدين على المستوى الداخلى للكورد والمستوى الخارجى ذات العلاقة بالحركات البريطانية والحكم العثمانى، وهذا من اجل توضيح كيفية تأثير الدين على توحيد الكورد وايضا العلاقات الكوردية مع السلطات الاخرى ان كانت السلطات اقليمية او غربية. يستنتج هذا البحث بشكل عام ان للدين فى بعض الأحيان تأثيره السلبى على الحركة الوطنية الكوردية وعلاقتها مع القوى الخارجية.