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The Last Ottoman Rogues: The Kurdish–Armenian Alliance in Syria and the New State System in the Interwar Middle East

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The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 paved the way for the emergence of new modern states in the Middle East, whether as fully independent entities or under mandatory oversight, by granting them sovereign powers within new 'national' territories. Paradoxically, however, as Bradley Miller puts it, the 'same sovereignty that empowered states also undermined them by limiting the reach of their authority in a world in which people crossed borders, with much more dexterity than law'.[2] Just as borders emerged as a resource for many to secure new economic avenues, sustain trans-border family connections or simply escape the law – criminals and smugglers[3] – the

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[2] Bradley Miller, *Borderline Crime: Fugitive Criminals and the Challenge of the Border, 1819–1914* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2016), 6.

[3] On smuggling activities across the Middle Easter borders in the early twentieth century, see Cyrus Schayegh, 'The Many Worlds of 'Abud Yasin; or, What Narcotics Trafficking in the Interwar Middle East Can Tell Us about Territorialization', *American Historical Review* 116(2) (2011): 273–306; Liat Kozma, 'White Drugs in Interwar Egypt: Decadent Pleasures, Emaciated Fellahin, and the Campaign against Drugs', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33(1) (2013): 89–101; Ryan Gingeras, *Heroin, Organized Crime, and the Making of Modern Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Haggai Ram, 'Hashish Traffickers, Hashish Consumers, and Colonial Knowledge in Mandatory Palestine', *Middle Eastern Studies* 52(3) (2016): 546–63; Mitchell Alan

new borders brought about disconnected jurisdictions that provided 'old' political actors with new opportunities, too.

Diverse ex-Ottoman revolutionary groups in particular tapped into the cracks of the emerging international system in the Middle East to pursue their political goals, taking advantage of a context still marked by instability and uncertainty. For one, although the First World War formally ended in 1918, it left behind several zones of post-war violence, as the disappearance of imperial borders – from Eastern Europe to the Caucasus and the Middle East – created spaces without order or a definite state authority.[4] Among these 'shatter zones',[5] the provisional frontier between Turkey and Syria holds an important place, since it 'proved more contentious and even more complicated to manage' for Turkish and French authorities alike.[6] Turkish and French authorities sought to cope with cross-border mobility, on the one hand, and insecurity and the lack of definition of the new international borders, on the other, by resorting to a delicate, albeit not always effective, act of balance, from co-opting armed irregular bands (*çetes*) and/or revolutionary groups to state violence, diplomatic manoeuvres, propaganda, security cooperation and informal agreements between low-level border officials.[7]

Bacci, 'Smugglers and State Builders: Opiate Trafficking and Institutional Development in Interwar Egypt and Turkey', MA thesis, University of Texas, 2017; Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, 'The Great Depression and the Making of the Turkish–Syrian Border, 1921–1939', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52(2) (2020): 311–26.

[4] Robert Gerwarth and John Horne (eds), *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[5] Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz (eds), *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

[6] Amit Bein, *Kemalist Turkey and the Middle East: International Relations in the Interwar Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 42. See also Christian Velud, 'Une expérience d'administration régionale en Syrie durant le mandat français: conquête, colonisation et mise en valeur de la Gazîra, 1920–1936', unpublished dissertation, University of Lyon 2, 1991; Jean-David Mizrahi, *Genèse de l'Etat mandataire. Service des Renseignements et bandes armées en Syrie et au Liban dans les années 1920* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2003); Sarah D. Shields, *Fezzes in the River: Identity Politics and European Diplomacy in the Middle East on the Eve of World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[7] Jean-David Mizrahi, 'La répression du banditisme sur les confins de la Syrie mandataire: nouveaux Etats et nouvelles frontières dans le Moyen-Orient des années 1920', *Relations*

This chapter explores how and to what extent the new borders in the region created opportunities and constraints to ex-Ottoman clandestine political groups in this rapidly changing historical context. Drawing from Turkish, British and French Mandate archival sources as well as Kurdish and Armenian activists' pamphlets and memoirs, the chapter focuses on the Khoybun League which, in 1927, brought together the formerly Istanbul-based Kurdish activists with the Armenians of the Dashnak Party into a revolutionary organisation active in French Syria and Lebanon with the aim of 'liberating' Armenia and Kurdistan from the Republic of Turkey.[8]

The chapter first analyses the factors that led to this alliance as well as the roles assigned to each group. While the Khoybun League sought to secure the allegiance of irregular armed bands on the slopes of Mount Ararat (1927–32), an area stretching between contemporary Turkey and Iran, the Dashnak militants committed themselves to providing their Kurdish counterpart with weapons, money and a solid transnational network of Armenian cells. Admittedly, the propagandists of the revolt took benefit from the increasing speed of travel and transportation facilities available in cities such as Aleppo, Cairo, Beirut or Alexandretta to disseminate their political goals with relative ease and to collect funds in places as far as Detroit, Rome and Nice. Notwithstanding this, while the region indeed witnessed an unprecedented intensification of the movement of people, goods and ideas,[9] the acceleration of speed and time compression that characterised the incipient

Internationales 114 (2003): 173–87; Yücel Güçlü, *Question of the Sanjak of Alexandretta: A Study in Turkish–French–Syrian Relations* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2001).

[8] The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), also known as Dashnaktsutyun (in short form Dashnak), was established in Tbilisi in 1890. On the Armenian activities in the late Ottoman period, see for a Unionist perspective Şükrü Hanioğlu, *Preparation of a Revolution: The Young Turks, 1902–1908* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 94–129. For an Armenian viewpoint, see Dikran Mesrob Kaligian, *Armenian Organization and Ideology under Ottoman Rule, 1908–1914* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2008); For a transnational study on the Armenian political parties, see Houri Berberian, *Roving Revolutionaries: Armenians and the Connected Revolutions in the Russian, Iranian, and Ottoman Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

[9] James L. Gelvin and Nile Green (eds), *Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Liat Kozma, Cyrus Schayegh and Avner Wishnitzer (eds), *A Global Middle East: Mobility, Materiality and Culture in the Modern Age, 1880–1940* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015).

modern globalisation outspread in a rather uneven manner. For one, armed rebels in Mount Ararat travelled with great difficulty across this mountainous region. More significantly, couriers and weapons deliveries by and large failed to reach the 'liberated area', thereby further increasing the experience of isolation among the former.

Of course, these activities did not go unnoticed. The chapter shows in its second section that the transnational networks mobilised by Kurdish and Armenian rebels to fight the Turkish regime contrasted against a backdrop of interstate cooperation to deal with this challenge. For different reasons, Turkey, British Iraq, French Syria and, ultimately, Persia concluded that the Kurdish–Armenian alliance was not beneficial for a region where stability was necessary for the consolidation of newly established states. Consequently, state authorities attempted to curtail revolutionaries' mobility in different ways, including border controls and the pervasive use of visas as a key device to channel cross-border movements. Although documentation of status was not completely new in the region, passports together with visas became tools of securitisation widely used after the First World War.[10] Several members of the Khoybun League and Dashnak were arrested, banished or expelled by the state authorities on such legal grounds. I argue thus that while the disruption of territorial sovereignty offered unprecedented political opportunities to former 'Ottoman' transnational revolutionary networks, the new emerging international system imposed new realities that, for them, also turned out to be insurmountable.[11]

[10] See Will Hanley, *Identifying with Nationality: Europeans, Ottomans, and Egyptians in Alexandria* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 70–4. See also John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Mark B. Salter, *Rights of Passage: The Passport in International Relations* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2003).

[11] For a critical assessment of the new international system and its contradictions, see Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Laura Robson, *States of Separation: Transfer, Partition, and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).

The Rugged Path towards the Kurdish–Armenian Alliance

At the end of the First World War, the Ottoman government accepted the conditions imposed by the victorious Allied powers at the Paris Peace Conference. Among the post-war accords, the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) holds an important place with regard to the international relations between Turkey and its southern neighbours throughout the interwar period. The treaty stipulated partitioning of the Ottoman Empire and obliged Turkey to renounce all its claims over the Arab provinces of the empire. In addition, the pact provided for an independent Armenia as well as an autonomous Kurdistan in contemporary northeastern and southeastern Turkey, respectively.

However, the resistance movement led by Mustafa Kemal – an Ottoman brigadier general – rejected the treaty altogether, and carried out a successful struggle that mixed paramilitary and conventional means of warfare. As Mustafa Kemal and other ex-Ottoman officers obtained a series of significant military victories in the Caucasus and southeastern Anatolia, the resistance movement made its territorial ambitions clear through what was called the *Misak-ı Milli* (the National Pact) which laid claim over Mosul province as well northern Syria, including Alexandretta and Aleppo.[12] The Pact of January 1920 rejected any division of territories populated by those Ottoman Muslims who were 'united in religion, culture, and aim' and, consequently, served as basis for cooperation between different anti-colonial fronts.[13] After the collapse of Faysal's kingdom (1918–20) in Syria, however, France officially received from the League of Nations its mandate over Syria and Lebanon. Likewise, the mandate for Iraq was awarded to Great Britain in 1920, while the political status of Mosul province was left open for negotiations between the Turkish and British governments.

[12] Bein, *Kemalist Turkey and the Middle East*, 10.

[13] For some comprehensive accounts on the anti-colonial fronts along the present Turkish–Syrian and Turkish–Iraqi borders, see Ahmet H. Saral, *Türk İstiklal Harbi Cilt IV: Güney Cephesi: İngiliz ve Fransızların Güney-Doğu Anadolu'yu İşgal Etmeleri Milli Mücadele Hareketleri, Bu Bölgede Yapılan Muharebeler ve Revandiz Harekatı* (Ankara: Genelkurmay Başkanlığı Harp Tarihi Dairesi, 1966), 265–78; Oktay Bozan, *Millî Mücadele Döneminde Diyarbakır, 1918–1923* (Konya: Çizgi Kitabevi, 2016), 255–312; Enes Demir, *Vazgeçilmeyen Topraklar Misak-ı Millî* (Istanbul: Post, 2017).

These international arrangements failed to bring stability to the region. A coalition of Turkish, Arab and Kurdish bands succeeded in repelling French advances in Cilicia and pushing the front line southwards, and, significantly, imposing new peace negotiations on France. Subsequently, after the Ankara agreement of October 1921 with the French, the Turkish government severed its links with Arab armed bands north of Aleppo, which allowed for the delimitation of the temporary boundary between Turkey and Syria.[14] This bilateral accord in addition to the French evacuation of Cilicia further isolated Great Britain in the face of anti-colonial unrest across Mesopotamia. By 1922, France and Great Britain were thus ready to open negotiations with the new leaders of Turkey.[15] The subsequent treaty of Lausanne of 24 July 1923 buried the perspectives of the Armenian and Kurdish states altogether.

Turkish–French relations nevertheless remained contentious along the common frontier. Particularly, Turkish propaganda in northeastern Syria proved to be extremely effective in hindering the advance of French troops up until 1926. Meanwhile, several French voices (unions, parties, anti-colonial committees) raised concerns about the financial viability as well as the political prospects of French mandate over Syria and Lebanon.[16] It is within this context, marked by both external and internal constraints, that the French high commissioner saw the launch of a profitable economic programme in Syrian as a tool that could serve to justify its 'civilising' mission in the Levant.[17]

However, the local populations that included both Kurdish and Arab elements were deemed insufficiently large and 'unprepared' to undertake a potential increase in arable lands. French authorities accordingly began to settle Christian migrants and refugees – Armenians and Syriacs – from south-

[14] Mizrahi, 'La répression du banditisme sur les confins de la Syrie mandataire', 173–87.

[15] Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007).

[16] Paul Huvelin, *Que vaut la Syrie?* (Marseille: Chambre de Commerce de Marseille, 1919); Alice Poulleau, *À Damas sous les bombes: journal d'une française pendant la révolution syrienne, 1924–1926* (Yvetot: Imprimerie Bretteville, s.d.); Pierre Bonnardi, *L'Imbroglio syrien* (Paris: Rieder, 1927).

[17] Christian Velud, 'La politique mandataire française à l'égard des tribus et des zones de steppe en Syrie: L'exemple de la Djézireh', in Riccardo Bocco, Ronald Jaubert and Françoise Métral (eds), *Steppes d'Arabie: Etats, pasteurs, agriculteurs et commerçants: le devenir des zones sèches* (Paris: PUF, 1993), 70–1.

ern Anatolia into the region.[18] This wave of rural Armenian settlement in northern Syria took a further twist with the arrival of politicised Armenian refugees fleeing from the Caucasus after the collapse in 1921 of the Dashnak-led Democratic Republic of Armenia.[19]

By 1925, as French troops and Christian settlers were still being attacked by irregular forces, the high commissioner encouraged Kurdish tribes fleeing repression from the Turkish government after the collapse of the Sheikh Said revolt to settle in northern Syria.[20] These refugees were supposed to serve two complementary goals: stabilising the frontier and increasing the agricultural production of the Upper Jazira. Yet among the newcomers there were not only tribal groups, but also members of Istanbul's Kurdish nationalist clubs that had been banished after the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Whereas some of these intellectuals and diverse members of the late Sheikh Said's family found refuge in Iraq, most of them looked to France for protection in the Levant.[21]

Although one could assume that the shared experience of exile and the existence of a 'common enemy' – that is, Turkey – could explain the later collaboration between the Kurdish and Armenian activists, the pre-existing Ottoman networks and contacts turned out to be equally important, if not more decisive. In that regard, the presence in Syria of some members of the Badirkhan family was key not only for the establishment of the Khoybun League, but also for its subsequent evolution, including its political alliance with the Dashnak Party.

[18] Christian Velud, 'L'émergence et l'organisation sociales des petites villes de Jézireh, en Syrie, sous le mandat français', *URBAMA* 16/17 (1986): 85–103; Vahé Tatchijan, *La France en Cilicie et en Haute-Mésopotamie: Aux confins de la Turquie, de la Syrie et de l'Irak* (Paris: Karthala, 2004).

[19] The return of some Dashnak members to the Levant was not surprising, for many of them had fought in Cilicia until 1920 when they decided to go to the Caucasus to back the short-lived Armenian Republic. Tatchijan, *La France en Cilicie et en Haute-Mésopotamie*, 100.

[20] The Ankara government deported some Kurdish tribal chieftains towards the west of the country as a means of clearing the eastern provinces of its more rebellious elements. Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880–1925* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989).

[21] Jordi Tejel, *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), 115–44.

Badirkhan Paşa had succeeded in creating a dynasty and ruled the semi-independent Bohtan emirate until 1847 when the Ottoman government crushed the short-lived rebellion. Most members of the Badirkhan family were forcibly exiled (*sürgün*) throughout the Ottoman territories while working for the empire at different administrative levels.[22] Although the majority of the Badirkhanis accommodated with the new situation, others such as Miqdad Midhat – editor of the first Kurdish newspaper *Kurdistan* (1898) – and Sureya opposed first the rule of Abdülhamid II and then the Unionist regime.[23]

In the last Ottoman years, the Kurdish clubs in Istanbul were torn down by two competing leaderships: Sayyid Abdulkadir (1851–1925), hailing from a Naqishbandi family of the Hakkari region, on the one hand; and Amin Ali Badirkhan (1851–1926), on the other. Although the two blocs were active within the *Kürdistan Teali Cemiyeti* (KTC), founded on 17 December 1918,[24] tensions between the two families led to a split in 1920 when the Badirkhanis created a committee with the aim of gaining Western support to create an independent Kurdistan.[25] After the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 and the suppression of the Sheikh Said rebellion two years later, all members of this society settled in the former Arab provinces of the empire. In the Levant, Jaladat, Kamuran and Sureya Badirkhan mobilised their family connections across the region to reorganise the Kurdish movement under their leadership. [26]

Apart from the Kurdish networks, the Armenian political movement

[22] See Malmîsanij, *Cizira Botanlı Bedirhaniler ve Bedirhan Ailesi Derneğinin Tutanakları* (Spanga: APEC, 1994).

[23] Sureya Badirkhan established a secret society in 1912 and made arrangements to assassinate Unionist leaders. Despite his capture, a year later Sureya escaped to Egypt where he kept publishing *Kurdistan* until 1917. See Basile Nikitine, 'Badrkhani, Thurayya (1883–1938) et Djaladat (1893–1951)', *Encyclopédie de l'Islam*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 895.

[24] For a comprehensive analysis of the tensions and debates within the KTC, see Martin Strohmeier, *Crucial Images in the Presentation of a Kurdish National Identity* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 36–74.

[25] Centre d'Archives diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN hereafter), Fonds Ankara, 36PO/1/92. 'Letter by the Ligue Sociale kurde', Istanbul, 18 May 1920.

[26] Barbara Henning, *Narratives of the History of the Ottoman–Kurdish Bedirhani Family in Imperial and post-Imperial Contexts: Continuities and Changes* (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2018), 509.

was not completely foreign to the Badirkhani.[27] In particular, Abdurrahman Badirkhan – via the journal *Kurdistan*[28] – as well as Armenian intellectuals had called for a decentralisation policy in order to keep together the different ethnic and religious groups inhabiting the Ottoman Empire.

In the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide, however, there seemed to be no reason to expect a renewal of contacts. Several Kurdish tribes had played a crucial role in the massacres and confiscation of property during the First World War.[29] Unexpectedly, however, the former Ottoman-Kurdish diplomat Sharif Paşa and the Armenian representative Boghos Nubar attempted a rapprochement in order to gain Western support at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919.[30] Thus, while Sharif Paşa's memorandum distilled anti-Armenian rhetoric, the accompanying map acknowledged Armenian territorial claims in northeastern Anatolia. Notwithstanding this, as Kurdish and Armenian delegates at the Conference partly laid claims over the same territories in Eastern Anatolia, mistrust rather than solidarity seemed to prevail.[31] The rapprochement therefore occurred against all expectations. According to Garo Sasuni, president of the Dashnak section in Beirut, the *Kürt Millet Fırkası* and Dashnak reached a provisional agreement that opened the door for a united action against the Turkish Republic in 1924.[32] However, in spring 1925 the

[27] See, for instance, the Dashnak call for friendship in its official journal *Troshak*, 'Kürtlere çağrı' 6 (8 June 1898), 5.

[28] Abdurrahman Badirkhan published a call to the Kurdish people in 1901 in which he asked the Kurds to stop attacking the Armenians and claimed unity between the two peoples. Garo Sasuni, *Kürt Ulusal Hareketleri ve 15. YY'dan Günümüze Ermeni Kürt Ilişkileri* (Istanbul: Med Yayinevi, 1992), 130.

[29] For a long durée perspective, see Tessa Hofman and Gerayer Koutcharian, 'The History of Armenian–Kurdish Relations in the Ottoman Empire', *Armenian Review* 39(4) (1986): 1–45. For a comprehensive study of the role played by Kurdish tribes in the Armenian genocide, see Janet Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Stanford, CT: Stanford University Press, 2011).

[30] Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil*, 196–8.

[31] Diverse Kurdish members of the KTC published a series of articles in the official journal *Jîn* ('Life') in which they contested Armenian aspirations in Eastern Anatolia using quantitative arguments. In addition, they argued that the Armenians were not the only Ottoman nation to have suffered in the war. See Memduh Selim, 'Bir harikati tenvir', *Jîn* 15 (27 March 1919), 100–1.

[32] Sasuni, *Kürt Ulusal Hareketleri*, 184.

Sheikh Said revolt unpredictably erupted without any coordination with the Armenian revolutionaries. The channel of communication between the two parties was not completely disrupted, though. In Paris, during summer 1927, 'several Armenians and Kurdish nationalists met together and resolved to unite their endeavours to establish the political freedom of the Kurdish and Armenian nations'.[33] The last and definite shape of the alliance was nevertheless given in the Levant, once more under the Badirkhan leadership.

The formation of the Khoybun League (*Xwebûn* in Kurdish-Kurmanji, lit. translated as 'Be yourself') or 'Independence League' was the result of a series of meetings held between September and October 1927 in Lebanon, which brought together seventeen representatives from several Kurdish organisations as well as tribal chiefs to discuss the political future of the Kurds in Turkey.[34] The goals of the new organisation included: to fight the Turks in order to create a Kurdish entity; collaborating with the Armenians; refusing to comply with the anti-Kemalist caliphate partisans (as a successful collaboration with this group offered insufficient guarantee of Kurdish independence);[35] friendly relations with the USSR, Persia and Iraq; and seeking support from a Great Power (France or, if necessary, Great Britain). Officially, however, the organisation simply sought to collect funds for the Kurdish refugees originating from Turkey and aimed to publish a newspaper in Kurdish and French.[36]

[33] The National Archives (TNA hereafter), CO 730/133/1. Confidential. The Residency in Baghdad to the Secretary of state for the Colonies, 14 July 1928.

[34] CADN, Fonds Syrie et Liban (1SL hereafter) /1/V/569, Report on the Kurds and Kurdistan. Beirut, 1 February 1929.

[35] The anti-Kemalist opposition was not limited to the Kurds and Armenians, though. While in the early 1920s, the Circassian irregular forces fought the Greeks and the royalists in Anatolia, the consolidation of Mustafa Kemal's authority soon brought about rifts between the new Turkish authorities and the Circassian leaders who commanded the formerly useful armed bands. In addition, Circassians were over-represented among the anti-Kemalist opposition, also known as the '150 undesirables' or *persona non grata* in Turkey. See Sedat Bingöl, *150'likler Meselesi: Bir İhanetin Anatomisi* (Istanbul: Bengi Yayınları, 2010). On the role played by Circassians in political conspiracies against the Kemalist leadership, see Ramazan Hakki Öztan, 'Republic of Conspiracies: Cross-Border Plots and the Making of Modern Turkey', *Journal of Contemporary History* (April 2020), available at: https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0022009419884627.

[36] CADN, 1SL/1/V/1055. Intelligence from Aleppo, Aleppo, 19 November 1927.

From the beginning, the Badirkhanis opened the door of the organisation to the Dashnak party. Furthermore, the first congress of the Khoybun League was held at the summer residence of Vahan Papazian, ex-Ottoman deputy for Van, in Behamdun (Lebanon). Thereafter, Papazian also participated, along with Ador Levonian, in the subsequent congress in Aleppo on 29 March 1928. In addition, other Dashnak members worked in close cooperation with the Kurdish committee. This collaboration was sealed when the treaty of October 1927 was signed in Beirut between the Dashnak and the Khoybun League, advocating the liberation of the two 'brother states'. According to the agreement, the two parties would recognise the right to independence of Kurdistan and United Armenia, while the delimitation of the border between the two states was to be decided according to the pre-war indigenous Kurdish and Armenian populations and as per the legal framework of the Treaty of Sèvres.[37]

For Yves Ternon, the alliance between the two parties was strategically 'natural'; even though the Dashnak lost any presence in Turkey in the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide and the fall of the Democratic Republic of Armenia in the Caucasus, the party still possessed a solid revolutionary experience and material resources that the Kurds lacked. In turn, the Kurds had the potential capacity to recruit and mobilise thousands of fighters against the Turkish Republic in Eastern Anatolia.[38] Although some Kurds were more doubtful of the prospects of an alliance,[39] previous intellectual relations together with pressing financial constraints led the Badirkhani to resist all critiques and actively collaborate with the Dashnak Party; a cooperation that bore some significant results between 1927 and 1932.

[37] See the agreement in Hamit Bozarslan, 'Histoire des relations kurdo-arméniennes', in Hans-Lukas Kieser (ed.), *Kurdistan und Europa* (Zurich: Chronos, 1997), 182–6.

[38] Yves Ternon, *La cause arménienne* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), 118.

[39] In May 1928, a number of Kurds published in the Damascus newspaper *Fatât al Arab* a proclamation openly repudiating the Khoybun League and stigmatising it as a plot to cheat the simple-minded Kurds into making war against the Turks, 'so that on their dead bodies the Armenians might create a national home in which the Kurds would be their slaves'. TNA, CO 730/133/1. Confidential. The Residency in Baghdad to the Secretary of state for the Colonies, 14 July 1928.

Khoybun's Activities under Dashnak Influence

The Khoybun League rapidly succeeded in creating a transnational network of branches across the Middle East in cities such as Aleppo, Damascus, Antioch, Hama, Jarablus and Hasaka (Syria); Baghdad, Mosul and Zakho (Iraq); Beirut (Lebanon); Cairo (Egypt); and Amman (Jordan) and beyond (Paris, Detroit). The committee, however, embodied a sort of 'unnatural marriage' between a Westernised intelligentsia – namely, intellectuals and ex-Ottoman officers – and representatives of traditional Kurdish society; that is, aghas, sheikhs and tribal leaders.[40] However, this alliance was not self-evident. A substantial effort on the part of Kurdish intellectuals was needed to adapt the modernist discourse on nationalism to the tribal social relations. The following oath formulated by the Khoybun constitutes a striking example:

> I do hereby swear on my honour and religion that from the date of my signing this promise for a period of two years . . . I will postpone until the expiration of these two years, all blood feuds and other disputes, and do my utmost to prevent bloodshed between two Kurds on private matters. Any Kurd who attempts to contravene this undertaking is regarded a traitor of his nation, and the murder of every traitor is a duty.[41]

Under Dashnak influence, the Khoybun League insisted on the importance of maintaining a tight internal structure and organisational discipline. In particular, Vahan Papazian monitored its formative period, imposing the Dashnak model on Khoybun thanks to Armenian financial leverage over its Kurdish counterpart.[42] Thus, according to the fundamen-

[40] The core of the Khoybun League at the time of its creation was made up of Jaladat Badirkhan (1893–1951), Kamuran Badirkhan (1895–1978), Sureya Badirkhan (1883–1938), Memduh Selim (1897–1976), Mehmed Sükrü Sekban (1881–1960), Ihsan Nuri (1893–1976), Bozan Shahin Beg (1895–1968), Mustafa Shahin Beg (?–1953), Sheikh Abdul Rahman Garisi (1869–1932), Hajo Agha (?–1940) and Rifat Mevlanzade (1869–1930). By 1929, the arrival of new Kurdish refugees strengthened the organisation. Among them were Akram Cemil Paşa (1891–1974), Kadri Cemil Paşa (1892–1973), Osman Sabri (1905–93), Ahmad Nafiz (1902–68) and Arif Abbas (1900–84).

[41] TNA, AIR 23/416, 'Kurdish nationalism. The Khoybun society', Special service officer, Mosul, 26 February 1930.

[42] FONDS RONDOT, Dossier Comités kurdes, 'Kurdes', 13 February 1940.

tal regulations, 'every member is to carry out any given order without raising objections'.[43] The society similarly underscored the responsibility of its members to induce 'every Kurd' to join the League. To do so, the committee charged its members with 'the duty of spreading propaganda for Kurdish independence and against the Turkish oppression and atrocities'.[44]

Khoybun's propaganda was, however, of variable geometry, as the themes put forth and the vocabulary used changed depending on the audience. This is perfectly illustrated by a letter written by Sureya Badirkhan to his brother Kamuran as the former was completing the publication of a propaganda brochure. Sureya Badirkhan explained that 'the brochure in the Persian language will deal with the weakening of the Aryan race . . .' In order to counter this danger, there should be an 'Aryan Confederation' led by Iran and uniting the Kurds, Armenians and Persians.[45] However, the Arab brochure was to deal with 'our numerous services rendered to the Islamic and Arab causes'. Finally, the French brochure would deal with 'the history of our revolutions and insurrections . . . foreigners' opinions of us and the duties incumbent on civilized Europe'.[46]

In addition to organisational inspiration, the Dashnaks also provided an ideological back-up to Kurdish propaganda. Roupen Ter Minassian (1882–1951), a long-time member of the ARF Bureau and a member of the short-lived Parliament of Yerevan, heralded the Aryan unity as a counterweight in the face of the pan-Turkism in the Caucasus and Central Asia.[47] The Armenian party also justified cooperation with the Khoybun League before Western public opinion and international forums such as the Second Socialist International. Thus, for instance, Armenian-American lawyer and

[43] TNA, AIR 23/414. 'The Khoybun Society: The Kurdish Race and Country', Special Service Officer, Sulaymaniyya, 10 September 1928.

[44] Ibid.

[45] The alleged Aryan character of the Armenians could also be read as a response to the anti-Armenian discourse in Germany based on a theory that did not include the Armenians in the Aryan race. See Stefan Ihrig, *Justifying Genocide: Germany and the Armenians from Bismarck to Hitler* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

[46] CADN, 1SL/1/V/1055, Sûreté Générale, Information No. 1985, Beirut, 22 August 1930.

[47] Roupen Ter Minassian, 'Iran yév Touran', *Troshak* 4 (1927).

activist Vahan Cardashian (1883–1934) published a couple of articles in support of the Ararat revolt in the *New York Times*.[48]

In a joint effort, Khoybun and Dashnak representatives sought to establish 'diplomatic' alliances with all powers that could help the two parties to reach their political aims – from the USSR to Great Britain, France, Italy, Greece and Persia. Although the results were not as expected, the Kurdish and Armenian representatives were received by state officials, thereby gaining in political legitimacy. Such diplomatic initiatives were topped off with further collaboration on tactics of violence that were tightly connected to earlier Ottoman practices; the organisation of armed bands on the slopes of Mount Ararat closely followed the *çete* model,[49] on the one hand, and the orchestration of assassination plots against the Turkish leadership, on the other.[50]

The continuity of such practices was hardly surprising. Several representatives of the 'last Ottoman generation' played crucial roles in the rebellions that sparked across the Levant and Anatolia in the 1920s.[51] As Michael Provence has observed 'abundant evidence . . . suggests that rebel participants – collective veterans of wars to save the Ottoman state – did not view the

[48] Vahan Cardashian, 'Kurds Fight for Freedom', 6 June 1930, and 'Assert Kurds are Winning', 18 October 1930, *New York Times*.

[49] Jean-David Mizrahi, 'Un nationalisme de la frontière: bandes armées et sociabilités politiques sur la frontière turco-syrienne au début des années 1920', *Vingtième Siècle: Revue d'histoire* 78 (2003): 19–34; Nadine Méouchy, 'Rural Resistance and the Introduction of Modern Forms of Consciousness in the Syrian Countryside, 1918–1926', in Thomas Philipp and Christoph Schumann (eds), *From the Syrian Land to the States of Syria and Lebanon* (Beirut: Orient-Institut, 2004), 275–90; Laila Parsons, *The Commander: Fawzi al-Qawuqji and the Fight for Arab Independence, 1914–1948* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2016).

[50] On conspiracies in the Ottoman period, see Florian Riedler, *Opposition and Legitimacy in the Ottoman Empire: Conspiracies and Political Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2011); Gwynne Dyer, 'The Origins of the "Nationalist" Group of Officers in Turkey, 1908–1918', *Journal of Contemporary History* 8(4) (1973): 121–64; Erik Jan Zürcher, 'Macedonians in Anatolia: The Importance of the Macedonian Roots of the Unionists for their Policies in Anatolia after 1914', *Middle Eastern Studies* 50(6) (2014): 960–75. See also Alp Yenen, 'The Young Turk Zeitgeist in the Middle Eastern Uprisings in the Aftermath of World War I', in Hakan Yavuz and Feroz Ahmad (eds), *War and Collapse: World War I and the Ottoman State* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), 1181–216.

[51] Michael Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

post-Ottoman revolts as separate movements of national liberation but rather as locally conditioned elements of a single, undifferentiated struggle'.[52] Yet while a shared repertoire of *komitadji* – that is, partisans, irregular troops or guerrilla movements[53] – conduct was evident, the former Ottoman officers framed their struggles in a variety of ways, borrowing ideas and discourses from diverse sources and cultural idioms, including Turkish nationalism, 'Ottoman-Muslim solidarity',[54] as well as Arab and Kurdish nationalism.

Such was the case of the military leader of the Ararat revolt. Like many Kurdish officers while declaring himself a 'Kurdish patriot', Ihsan Nuri (1892–1976) did not desert the Ottoman army during the First World War.[55] Subsequently, he joined the KTC and published an article in the association's newspaper *Jîn* where he hailed the Wilsonian principles on self-determination as a solution for the 'Kurdish issue'.[56] By 1922, he founded together with other officers and young intellectuals *Azadî* ('Freedom'), a nationalist organisation that sought to create a Kurdish state as per the Treaty of Sèvres.[57] In the meantime, however, Ihsan Nuri remained in the Turkish army until 1924, when he was sent to Bayt al Shabah – in the Hakkari region – to suppress a Nestorian uprising. After having received, and more likely misinterpreted, a telegram from the *Azadî* headquarters in Istanbul, Ihsan Nuri and his Kurdish comrades mutinied in September 1924.[58] Idly organised, the revolt failed and their leaders had to seek refuge in British Iraq. On their way, diverse Kurdish officers were either imprisoned or

[52] Michael Provence, 'Ottoman Modernity, Colonialism, and Insurgency in the Interwar Arab East', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43(2) (2011): 207.

[53] See for instance, Uğur Ümit Üngör, 'Paramilitary Violence in the Collapsing Ottoman Empire', in Robert Gerwarth and John Horne (eds), *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 164–83.

[54] Erik Jan Zürcher, 'The Vocabulary of Muslim Nationalism', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 137(1) (1999): 81–92.

[55] Born in Bitlis, Ihsan Nuri studied at the Military Academy in Istanbul. During the First World War, Nuri was injured. After his recovery, he was sent to the Russian front where he was in constant contact with Kâzim Karabekir.

[56] Ihsan Nuri, 'Wilson Prensipleri ve Kürtler', *Jîn* 15 (1919).

[57] Nuri Dersimi, *Kürdistan tarihinde Dersim* (Köln: Mezopotamien Verlag, 1999), 177; Zinar Soran, 'Civata Azadiya Kurd', *çira* 1 (1995): 58–60.

[58] Dersimi, *Kürdistan tarihinde Dersim*, 178; Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism*, 43–5.

killed, leaving Ihsan Nuri more isolated from his closest collaborators in the army.[59]

Invited to participate in the foundational congress of the Khoybun League in 1927, Ihsan Nuri rather preferred to move to the slopes of Mount Ararat where Ibrahim Agha of the Jalali tribal confederation had initiated an uprising against the Ankara government. Subsequently, the Khoybun League granted the ex-Ottoman officer the title of General Chief of the Kurdish forces. A Dashnak *komitadji*, Ardashes Mouradian (alias Zeynal Bey), was sent to the Ararat area to serve as a liaison with the Kurdish forces.[60] While Ihsan Nuri tried to disseminate notions of national solidarity and use modern means of propaganda and warfare – the Kurdish flag and a national anthem, the journal *Agri*, and a transitional 'Constitution' – in the 'Republic of Ararat', the Kurdish forces were actually organised along tribal lines and could only conduct raids in small groups against remote Turkish military posts.[61] Like other ex-Ottoman officers engaged in rebellions throughout the 1920s, Ihsan Nuri tried to adjust the national ethos to the rural milieu and guide, unsuccessfully, guerrilla bands that ultimately lacked military discipline and expertise.

Finally, while the Ararat revolt took place in isolation in a peripheral area, the Khoybun and Dashnak operatives resorted to other violent means to reach their goals; that is, assassination plots against the Republic leadership. Thus, for instance, in 1928 Memduh Selim entrusted a Khoybun *fedaî* with the assassination of Mustafa Kemal. However, the plot was uncovered and the Turkish police caught the *fedaî* in Istanbul.[62] As the revolt appeared to collapse, the Dashnak Party allegedly made two new – and ineffective

[59] Ihsan Nouri, *Mon destin de Kurde* (*Besar hatimin*, trans. Ayoub Babo Barzani) (Geneva: Editions Orient-Réalités, 2019), 103–5.

[60] Garabet K. Moumdjian, 'Armenian Involvement in the 1925 (Ararat) and 1937 (Dersim) Kurdish Rebellions in Republican Turkey: Mapping the Origins of Hidden Armenians', *International Crimes and History* 19 (2018): 188–9.

[61] Ihsan Nouri, *La révolte de l'Agri Dagh* (Geneva: Editions kurdes, 1986), 129–30. For the regulations issued at Mount Ararat, see CADN, 1SL/1/V/1055, 'Proclamation de l'occupation effective et de l'institution du gouvernement', Services civils du Délégué, Aleppo, 23 May 1933.

[62] TNA, AIR 23/407, 'Turkey and Syria: Anti-Kemalist and Kurdish Activities', Special Service Officer, Mosul, 29 September 1928.

– attempts at assassinating members of the Turkish leadership.[63] Such activities, however, required a completely different context than in Mount Ararat; that is, speed of movement, transport facilities and a solid transnational network of revolutionary cells.

The Benefits of the Disruption of Sovereignty and Mobility

Being a trans-imperial organisation from its inception, the Dashnaks had been involved in the Russian, Persian and Ottoman revolutions in the early twentieth century.[64] As the three empires collapsed between 1917 and 1925, the Dashnaks became a trans-national party with many ramifications in the Middle East and beyond, with several of its militants remaining operational in the interwar years. Kaspar Ipekian, for instance, took an active role in the Persian constitutional revolution of 1905 and in 1931. After becoming director of the tobacco company Matossian in Beirut, he became a go-between between the Dashnaks and the Khoybun League. In particular, he hired some Khoybun members and Dashnak militants as fee collectors and suppliers for the tobacco company in different towns located along the Turkish–Syrian border.[65] As a result, the Khoybun agents benefited from a legal cover to travel throughout the Levant to gather information, distribute funds among the local branches of the respective organisations and coordinate the Khoybun–Dashnak activities.[66]

Khoybun–Dashnak undertakings, however, were not limited to interpersonal relations in the Levant. Actually, the two parties took advantage of a

[63] According to the Turkish authorities, Hrant Canikyan, a Dashnak *fedaî*, left Beirut and travelled first to Athens and then to Istanbul to kill certain Turkish elites in 1931. He was caught in Istanbul, but ended up committing suicide. Türk İnkilap Tarihi Enstitüsü (TİTE hereafter), K. 27, G.103, 2 October 1931; TNA, FO 371/16095, 'Alleged Armenian Plot against Leading Kemalists in Turkey', Ankara, 12 August 1932.

[64] Berberian, *Roving Revolutionaries*.

[65] CADN, 1SL/1/V/1/572, Sûreté Générale, 'Note sur le mouvement kurde', Beirut, 4 January 1931; CADN, 1SL/1/V/1/1765, Sûreté Générale, Aleppo, 10 August 1931. See also Vahé Tatchjian, 'Le Khoybun dans la Haute-Mésopotamie syrienne sous mandat français et le rapprochement kurdo-arménien', *Etudes kurdes* 6 (2004): 7–40.

[66] In 1932, Kaspar Ipekian was replaced having been accused of neglecting the tobacco business in favour of his political activities. Thereafter, several Khoybun and Dashnak activists working for the company in northern Syria lost their legal covers. CADN, 1SL/1/V/1/1767, Sûreté Générale, Information No. 578, Beirut, 2 February 1932.

modern world that was increasingly connected and interdependent. Taking a cue from the increasingly robust literature on mobility and globalisation studies,[67] Houri Berberian underlines that already in the early twentieth century non-Western areas witnessed, albeit in an uneven manner, significant shifts in technologies of global communication and transportation such as the railways and telegraph, 'resulting in an important new round of "time–space compression" or the accelerated "shrinking" of the world', thus making the world smaller, time shorter and life faster.[68]

Unsurprisingly, the Khoybun and Dashnak propagandists tapped into the improvement and circulation of new technologies and the consequent 'shrinking of the world' to disseminate their ideas, reach distant locations and collect money to support the military revolt in Mount Ararat. For one, in addition to written propaganda reproduced in different formats – booklets, printed illustrations and postcards – information about Khoybun's aims and activities were also spread verbally through the use of gramophones, which at that time were played in coffeehouses before they became household items.[69] The Sodwa Company of Aleppo, for instance, recorded Kurdish songs with anti-Kemalist sentiments that were then smuggled into Turkey.[70] Likewise, the Khoybun activists used the magic lantern to make short films that were to be screened 'in the United States for propaganda purposes'.[71]

Human mobility became a key factor for Khoybun activities as well. In 1928, Sureya Badirkhan spent seven months in the United States in order to mobilise the Kurdish American community – about 10,000 or 12,000 in number[72] – in favour of the Ararat revolt and attract political support to the

[67] Roland Wenzlhuemer, *Connecting the Nineteenth-Century World: The Telegraph and Globalization* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015), 47.

[68] Berberian, *Roving Revolutionaries*, 41–2.

[69] Uri M. Kupferschmidt, 'On the Diffusion of "Small" Western Technologies and Consumer Goods in the Middle East during the Era of the First Modern Globalization', in Liat Kozma, Cyrus Schayegh, and Avner Wishnitzer (eds), *A Global Middle East: Mobility, Materiality and Culture in the Modern Age, 1880–1940* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 243–4.

[70] CADN, 1SL/1/V/571, Sûreté Générale, Beirut, 25 November 1936; BCA.030.18.71.8.6, 'Şeyh Said tarafından doldurulmuş Kürtçe plağın, yurda sokulmasının yasaklanması', Ankara, 28 January 1937.

[71] CADN, 1SL/1/V/1055, Sûreté Générale, Beirut, 12 April 1930.

[72] Most Kurds in the United States lived in cities such as Detroit, New York and Philadelphia.

Kurdish cause. Additionally, Sureya published a booklet in Philadelphia on the Kurdish Question (*The Case of Kurdistan against Turkey*), as well as a proclamation to the Kurdish community in America. In the latter, after recalling the sacrifices of Kurdish soldiers for the sake of the Ottoman Empire, Sureya summoned the Kurdish community in America to help the Khoybun: 'Let us prove to the world that a Kurd, although far away from home, is still a Kurd and a true patriot.'[73]

Sureya Badirkhan's manoeuvres turned out to be, at least partly, successful. According to the British Consulate in Detroit, 'the Kurds in this country had been sending $50,000 to $60,000 annually to Mustafa Kemal, but Sureya has converted them to the idea of independence and they have agreed to tax themselves one dollar weekly, which will be sent to the Khoybun' instead.[74] Sureya's journey was not, however, a straightforward one. The same report explains that on his way to the United States, Sureya Badirkhan was invited by Benito Mussolini and 'spent fifteen days as his guest at Rome and came away with the impression that Mussolini was willing to help the Kurds'. When Badirkhan eventually left New York for Paris on 19 April 1929, in the steamboat *Ile-de-France*, he also went to London and the Greek president allegedly invited him 'to visit Athens on his way back'.[75]

Equally, the Khoybun representative in Baghdad, Şükrü (Mehmed) Sekban, travelled to Paris in June 1927, via Beirut and Marseille. In addition to Paris, he visited Berlin, Brussels and London. Upon his return to Baghdad via Cairo and Beirut in November 1927, he brought with him funds said to amount £10,000.[76] Khoybun's allies did not lag behind, either. In 1928, Vahan Papazian was thought to have distributed $20,000 to the Kurdish

After Sureya Badirkhan's stay in Detroit, a Khoybun branch made up of 25–30 people was created in that city. Rohat Alakom, 'Ji aliyê kurdan de keşfkirina Amerîkayê (1915–1930)', *Nûdem* 21 (1997): 95–6.

[73] TNA, AIR 23/157, 'Khoybun's Proclamation to the Kurdish Community in America, 20 June 1928'. Qaimaqan Sinjar to Administrative Inspector, Mosul, 28 August 1929.

[74] TNA, AIR 23/415, British Consulate in Detroit, John Cameron to Sir Austen Chamberlain, Detroit, 18 April 1929.

[75] Ibid.

[76] TNA, AIR 23/413, 'Advance Extracts to the Iraq Police', Iraq Police, Criminal Investigation Department, Baghdad, 19 May 1928; TNA, FO 371/13032, 'Kurdish–Armenian collaboration', Air Headquarters, Iraq Command, Baghdad, 14 June 1928.

organisation after an active campaign from diverse Armenian cells in different countries.[77]

Steamboats were not only crucial for the circulation of the Kurdish and Armenian revolutionaries across the seas, they were also important for the shipment of weapons for the Kurdish rebels in Mount Ararat. Thus, for instance, in 1930 several Greek cargos reportedly departed from Nice carrying around 125,000 guns and 50,000 grenades, which were to be delivered at a dock in the Persian Gulf.[78]

Admittedly, the experience of movement was not the same for all Kurdish and Armenian activists. For one, whereas the propagandists of the revolt took benefit from the increasing speed of travel and transportation facilities available in cities such as Aleppo, Cairo, Beirut or Alexandretta, armed rebels in the Ararat travelled with great difficulty across this mountainous region. Incidentally, individuals experienced the tensions between *acceleration* and *deceleration* processes during their long journeys across a region in motion.[79] Such was the case of Yashar Khanum, who by late 1928 left western Turkey to join her husband, Ihsan Nuri, in northeastern Turkey. Drawing on Khanum's memoirs, Kumru Toktamis reports that she 'travelled from Denizli to Izmir by train, from Izmir to Mersin on boat, took another train to Aleppo'. After spending some months in diverse houses of Khoybun members in northern Syria, she travelled on carriages a few times between Kobane and Aleppo, before driving to Mosul via Deir ez-Zor and reached Baghdad. Then, she took a 'train to cross the Iraq–Iran border and arrived in Tabriz by the next fall', from where she arrived at Mount Ararat on horseback.[80]

Individual stories, together with the observation of particular locations, allow us to nuance the narratives of a growing literature in Middle Eastern

[77] TNA AIR 23/407, Air Staff Intelligence, Baghdad, 25 May 1928; TNA AIR 23/414, Air Staff Intelligence, Baghdad, 2 November 1928.

[78] There is, however, no evidence that this delivery reached the rebels in Mount Ararat, Archives Nationales, Série F7:13436, Police commissariat, Nice, 25 October 1930.

[79] On this idea, see Huber Valeska, *Channelling Mobilities: Migration and Globalisation in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[80] Kumru Toktamis, 'Yashar Khanum: The Woman for Whom the War never Ended', in Tomasz Pudlocki and Kamil Ruszala (eds), *Intellectuals and World War I: A Central European Perspective* (Krakow: Jagiellonian University Press, 2018), 299.

globalisation that tends to emphasise mobility and integration while neglecting the processes of exclusion as well as the 'limitations and tenuousness of global exchange' in the interwar years.[81] Ultimately, they also point to the existence of multiple mobilities and their interdependence, for despite the expectations of unhampered speed in an increasingly modern world, transnational revolutionaries realised that the traditional forms of mobility – camels, animal transport vehicles and horses – were essential in securing connectivity across the modern Middle East.

Tightening the Rope around Trans-border Activists

Contrary to general assumptions about the eagerness of Middle Eastern states to curtail cross-border movement in the interwar years, a closer observation of the increasing flows of people, ideas and goods across new and old borders, shows that the former, as elsewhere, sought to both facilitate and prevent mobility through different 'channelling processes'.[82] In turn, and as a consequence of this enduring balancing act, human and non-human mobilities played 'a foundational role in both (re)making and empowering states' in these critical years.[83] The facilitation and prevention of circulation of transnational revolutionaries by states was by no means an exception.

Undeniably, the French authorities could have prevented, from the very beginning, all activities by the Khoybun League should they have so wished. Available documentation reveals that the French intelligence services in the Levant were well aware of the Kurdish committee's subversive activities. Furthermore, as Elizabeth Thompson points out, the French authorities imposed on all newly established organisations in Syria and Lebanon a standard procedure to inform them of their minutes and their activities.[84] Although the Khoybun League kept some decisions and plans under the French radar,

[81] Nile Green, 'Fordist Connections: The Automotive Integration of the United States and Iran', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 58(2) (2016): 292.

[82] See Joel Quirk and Darshan Vigneswaran, 'Mobility Makes States', in Darshan Vigneswaran and Joel Quirk (eds), *Mobility Makes States: Migration and Power in Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 1–34.

[83] Ibid., 8.

[84] Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 91–2.

the mandatory authorities had 'official' informers in the Khoybun League itself, notably Memduh Selim and Jaladat Badirkhan, as well as spies within both the Kurdish and Armenian communities.[85]

Against this backdrop, the Turkish government believed that the French authorities were systematically ignoring Khoybun and Dashnak activities in the Levant and, more importantly, Ankara suspected France of exploiting both organisations against Turkey's interests. Turkish concerns were not completely groundless. On the one hand, France relied on Kurdish and Armenian refugees, given their essential role in the stabilisation of the frontier as well as the economic development of Syrian Jazira. Their settlement along the Turkish–Syrian border became thus unquestionable. Turkish–French relations entered a critical phase in the early 1920s due to the contentious demarcation of the common border. Beyond the economic considerations, France aimed at controlling a zone that could ensure various means of communication with the ex-Ottoman province of Mosul.[86] In turn, between 1925 and 1926, Turkish interest in securing control of the Upper Jazira became more marked. The definitive annexation of Mosul province to Iraq, together with the settlement of Kurdish intellectuals and tribal leaders in northern Syria entailed the loss of two predominantly Kurdish territories which Turkey could not effectively control. Crucially, the French could use the Khoybun–Dashnak card if necessary.

In the late 1920s, however, new regional developments brought about a dramatic shift in interstate relations for the two revolutionary organisations. On 29 June 1929, a standing bilateral Frontier Commission began to work on the actual delineation of the Syrian–Turkish boundary between Nusaybin and Jazirat ibn Omar. Thereafter, the Turkish delegation frequently denounced the presence of Kurdish and Armenian cells along the border during the meetings of the Frontier Commission.[87] Although some

[85] The Kurdish leaders frequently met the French authorities to explain the evolution of the movement. In return, Jaladat Badirkhan and Memduh Selim could claim to be 'close' to the mandatory power and thus gain in political and social influence among the Kurds. CADN, 1SL/1/V/569, 'Rapport sur les Kurdes et le Kurdistan', Damascus, 1 February 1929.

[86] David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996), 151–71.

[87] BCA.030.10.230.549.4, 'Türkiye-Suriye Daimi Hudut Komisyonu'nun Halep'teki toplantısında alınan kararla ilişkin Urfa Valisi Ethem Bey'in raporu', Ankara, 24 May 1931.

Turkish claims were simply exaggerated, Turkey succeeded in developing an important intelligence network in northern Syria, and thus came to observe very closely Khoybun's activities.[88]

At first, the French did not undertake any drastic measures against the two committees. However, after the failure of the Khoybun leaders' intervention in July 1930, the mandate authorities took a more negative stance towards the Kurdish organisation.[89] French authorities accordingly began to expel some Khoybun members from the border area and imposed house arrests on others. Although the Dashnak Party did not participate in this military intervention, some of its members were resettled in other cities, while Vahan Papazian, who happened to be in Paris at the time of the Khoybun action, was not allowed to return to Syria.[90]

The cooperation between French mandatory and Turkish authorities to solve 'common security problems' considerably paved the way for a much more thorough surveillance and regulation of mobility across the Syrian–Turkish border and, ultimately, the emergence of a 'boundary regime'.[91] In addition, passports and visas became standard tools to hinder Khoybun–Dashnak activities across the region: 'The French Consulates in Baghdad and Mosul should be advised to refuse any visa application for Syria' to all Dashnak and Khoybun members based in

[88] The intelligence network was especially effective in Aleppo, where the Turkish Consulate gathered information from different northern provinces. See, for instance, BCA.030.10.113.771.1, 'Cemil paşazade Ekrem, Kadri, Mehmet, Bedri aileleriyle Halep'te Santral otelinde kalkıkları ve Hoybun üyesi Memduh Selim'in evinde bir toplantı yapılacağı', Aleppo, 4 April 1929.

[89] In 1930, as the Turkish army surrounded the Kurdish rebels in Mount Ararat, the Khoybun leadership in Syria organised a raid in Turkey to divert Turkish attention from the Ararat area. Jaladat Badirkhan and other members of the Kurdish committee crossed the border in small groups and in different directions. However, the lack of local support among the Kurdish populations in Turkey led the raiders to return to Syria immediately. CADN, 1SL/1/V/1055, Sûreté Générale, Beirut, 9 August 1930.

[90] TNA, AIR 23/243, Special Service Officer, Mosul, 9 September 1930; MAE, Quai d'Orsay, Série Levant 1918–1940, sous-série Syrie-Liban, 466. Report by Lieutenant Mortier, director of the Service des renseignements, Beirut, 23 August 1930.

[91] George Gavrilis defines 'boundary regimes' as locally cooperative methods of border control. George Gavrilis, *The Dynamics of Interstate Boundaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 14–15.

Iraq.[92] Although the French authorities continued to ignore and even encourage contraband along the Turkish–Syrian border in order to force Turkey to open its national market to goods produced or circulating through French Syria, they impressed on Jaladat and Kamuran Badirkhan the need to transform their political and military activities into a cultural movement.[93]

Similarly, by the late 1920s, Great Britain had lost interest in allowing cross-border cooperation between the Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish committees. At first, the British government had attempted to reconcile the aspirations of Kurdish nationalists with the objectives of British policy in Iraq; that is, 'the consolidation of King Faysal's government in Baghdad, and the maintenance of the territorial integrity of Iraq so that it would become a viable state'.[94] Yet, after securing control over Mosul in 1926 and despite League of Nations' provisions summoning Great Britain to guarantee cultural rights for the Kurdish populations, the British dismissed the aspirations of the Kurdish nationalist committees for the duration of the Mandate. Stability and the viability of the Iraqi state were perceived as being incompatible with the pervasiveness of trans-border Kurdish connectedness.

When Jaladat Badirkhan established contacts with the Rowanduz Committee in Iraq – led mainly by the exiled family of the late Sheikh Said, British concerns grew further.[95] By 1928, the mandatory authorities in Iraq and the British consulates in the Levant were closely monitoring all moves and exchanges between the two Kurdish committees, for any attack against Turkey from Iraqi territory could have very negative effects on British Iraq. Just as with the French, the meetings of the Turkish–Iraqi Permanent Frontier Commission became a privileged setting for the Turkish delegation to protest against the facilities which were being given to Kurdish and

[92] CADN, 1SL/1/V/572, Sûreté Générale, 'Note sur le mouvement kurde', Beirut, 4 January 1931.

[93] CADN, 1SL/1/V/1055, Cabinet Politique to the General Inspector of Customs, Damascus, 28 December 1932.

[94] Othman Ali, 'The Career of Özdemir: A Turkish Bid for Northern Iraq, 1921–1923', *Middle Eastern Studies* 53(6) (2017): 968.

[95] On the Rowanduz Committee and its contacts with the Khoybun League, see CADN, 1SL/1/V/1055, Information No. 345, Beirut, 4 June 1928; TNA, AIR 23/407, 'Anti-Kemalist and Kurdish Activities', Aleppo, 17 June 1929.

Armenian propagandists in Syria to visit Iraq. Anxious to appease diplomatic relations with Turkey, the British paid particular attention to the work of vetting and verification of revolutionary agents entering and crossing Iraqi territory, urging the refusal of visa applications by 'members of the Badirkhan family and any person suspected of being connected with the Kurdish or Armenian nationalist movement'.[96]

As the rope was tightening around Khoybun–Dashnak agents across the region, Persian support for Turkish endeavours in the Ararat area became central. As a matter of fact, between 1928 and 1930 the rebels in Mount Ararat 'received at least tacit and probably some actual support from Iran'.[97] For one, during the revolt, Tehran allowed Kurdish forces to cross freely into its territory; they conducted hit-and-run actions against the Turkish positions and then sought refuge in Persian territory.[98] In addition, Persian authorities temporally allowed Khoybun agents to sustain a channel of communication with the headquarters in Mount Ararat. Thus, for instance, when Jaladat Badirkhan requested a visa to travel to Iraq and Persia in order to meet Ihsan Nuri, the British enquired of the Persian government whether they wished Jaladat to go on to Persia. Although at first the answer was negative, a few hours later a second telegram arrived saying 'that the Persian Government

[96] TNA, CO 730/133/1, The Residency in Baghdad to the Secretary of state for the Colonies, 14 July 1928.

[97] Robert Olson, *The Kurdish Question and Turkish–Iranian Relations: from World War I to 1998* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 1998), 23.

[98] Mount Ararat and its surroundings served for centuries as the frontier region between the Ottoman and Safavid empires. In 1913, Great Britain and Russia mediated between the two powers for a more precise demarcation of the common boundary. It left Mount Ararat on the Turkish side of the border, whereas Little Mount Ararat was recognised as Persian territory, more precisely in (western) Azerbaijan province. Notwithstanding this, Persia was still concerned that Turkey might harbour a pan-Turkish agenda, including territorial ambitions on Persian Azerbaijan. In addition, Simko's relations with Turkey led Reza Shah to consider a wait-and-see strategy with regard to the Kurdish rebels in Mount Ararat. See Bein, *Kemalist Turkey and the Middle East*, 35–41. On Simko, see Martin van Bruinessen, 'A Kurdish Warlord on the Turkish–Persian Frontier in the Early Twentieth Century: Ismail Agha Simko', in Touraj Atabaki (ed.), *Iran and the First World War: Battleground of the Great Powers* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 69–93. For a long-term study on this frontier, see Sabri Ates, *Ottoman–Iranian Borderlands: Making a Boundary, 1843–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

desired that no obstacle should be put in the way of his going on to Persia, as they wished to see what he was like'.[99]

Nader Entessar argues that Reza Shah 'apparently was intent on using his Kurdish card to force Turkey to settle some of its territorial disputes with Iran'.[100] Yet, as the revolt reached its highest point in the summer of 1930, the Ankara government threatened to bomb Persian's territory if Tehran did not stop supporting the Kurdish rebels and, allegedly, built an airstrip to accommodate 100 aircraft near the border.[101] Importantly, Ankara suggested that modification of the border through territorial exchange – that is, giving Little Mount Ararat to Turkey – was essential to guarantee peace and security along the frontier zone.[102] Thereafter, Reza Shah eventually decided to cooperate with Ankara in a joint military campaign against the Kurdish forces; the Persian army blocked the roads on the eastern slopes and evacuated the whole Persian–Kurdish population from the frontier zone. Interestingly, this dramatic shift was justified by Tehran with reference to the principle of international cooperation between sovereign states enshrined in the post-First World War international system:

> The Persian Government had no direct interest or concern in the annihilation of the Ararat Kurds. But no order-loving state can countenance insurrection even in a foreign country; it is rather in duty bound to assist in stamping it out.[103]

In May 1931, in the face of a new joint military operation the rebels were dispersed with casualties and retreated in the vicinity of the frontier. Helpless, Ihsan Nuri and other leaders of the revolt sought refuge in Persia in small groups. The collapse of the Ararat revolt coincided with the signing of the Turkish–Persian Frontier treaty on 23 January 1932, which by and large satisfied Turkey's requests; namely, full control over Little Mount

[99] TNA, CO 730/133/1, Confidential, The Residency in Baghdad to the Secretary of state for the Colonies, 14 July 1928.

[100] Nader Entessar, *Kurdish Ethnonationalism* (London: Lynne Rienner, 1992), 85.

[101] Olson, *The Kurdish Question and Turkish–Iranian Relations*, 23.

[102] 'Mount Ararat: Turkish Offer to Persia', *The Times*, 25 August 1930.

[103] TNA, FO 371/15369, 'Translation from the *Iran* of 15 July 1931', Interview with Colonel Kazem Khan Sayah, Chief of the Turco-Persian Frontier Security Commission.

Ararat. In return, Persia received small strips of land near Kotur and Bazirgan.

Conclusion

While few former 'Ottoman' revolutionaries succeeded in reaching their political goals and securing durability in the interwar years, this chapter has shown that the transnational networks were nevertheless crucial in testing the limits of national sovereignties across the newly established Middle East. In that regard, the study of the Dashnak–Khoybun alliance against the Turkish Republic between 1927 and 1932 allows us to better grasp the contentious processes of state formation and border-making in the interwar Middle East. The emergence of spaces without order or a definite state authority in the aftermath of the First World War, along with the disruption of sovereignty that characterised the post-war international system, allowed revolutionary groups to challenge the newly established states. The room for manoeuvre of the former, however, was subject to a number of conditions; namely, the continuity of interstate rivalry.

Critically, between 1927 and 1930, the Khoybun League and Dashnak benefited from the on-going territorial tensions between Turkey and Syria, on the one hand, and between Turkey and Iran, on the other. This was the time when Great Britain adopted a neutral strategy, while working to avert the consolidation of trans-border relations between the Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish committees, which could threaten the stability of the Iraqi state. As a result, the Kurdish and Armenian rebels were allowed to pursue their revolutionary activities across the region and beyond. In so doing, the two organisations were to some extent garnered with external support to their cause and collected significant financial resources.

At first, these activities further strained regional interstate relations. Yet the failed armed intervention of the Khoybun leaders in 1930, along with the timid improvement of the diplomatic relations between France and Turkey in 1929, struck a powerful blow against the Khoybun–Dashnak alliance. Crucially, several members of the Khoybun League and Dashnaks were removed from the border zone, while others were banished or expelled from the Levant territories by the French authorities on legal grounds. Eager to cooperate with Turkey, Great Britain increasingly denied visas to Khoybun

activists, thereby preventing cross-border mobility and, more significantly, the connection between the Khoyboun leaders in Syria and the military headquarters in Mount Ararat. The growing military power of the Turkish army as well as the Turkish–Persian security cooperation along the border did the rest.

Incidentally, the Khoybun League and its fighters in Mount Ararat experienced themselves a ubiquitous characteristic of state borders; that is, depending on the time period and geographic location, borders may be acutely monitored in one instance and neglected the next.[104] While borders remained widely open between 1927 and 1930, interstate cooperation made them less porous in the early 1930s, with dramatic consequences for transborder revolutionaries. Confronted by the failure of the revolt in Ararat and the internal struggles in the Kurdish camp, the 1927 accord that sealed the Khoybun–Dashnak alliance became simply obsolete.

[104] Sabine Dullin, 'Des frontières s'ouvrent et se ferment. La mise en place d'un espace socialiste derrière le rideau de fer, 1953–1970', *Relations internationales* 147 (2011): 35–48.