

## LECTURES

## From moveable empire to immovable state: Ottoman policies towards nomads and refugees in the modern era

Reşat Kasaba

On January 15, 2003, the *New York Times* published a front-page article about a Kurdish tribe called the Hamwand that was engaged in a war of resistance against the armies of Saddam Hussein in Northern Iraq and also against Ansar al-Islam, a militant group connected to al-Qaeda, in the east. On these two fronts, the Hamwand fighters were led, respectively, by a father and a son, and most of the fighters were either related to each other or were regarded as family by their leaders. According to the *Times*, they were all completely dedicated to their cause, and whatever the odds, they were confident of their eventual victory and vindication.

A little over a century earlier, as the Ottomans embarked on their program of reform and centralization, they had to deal with the very same Hamwand (or *Hemvend*) tribe. After repeatedly failing to entice the leaders to give up their autonomy, in the 1880s and the 1890s the Ottomans broke up this tribe, confiscated its animals, and scattered its members over a large territory in Central and Western Anatolia, all the way to İşkodra on the Balkans and Tripoli in Libya. Despite the apparent determination of the Ottomans to erase all traces of this tribe from Eastern Anatolia and the Arab provinces, the Hemvends returned to their places of origin, resumed their nomadic ways, and reasserted their local influence by the turn of the twentieth century. In his detailed ethnography of Kurdish tribes in 1908, Mark Sykes identified 1,200

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Reşat Kasaba, Stanley D. Golub Chair and Director, Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington, Thomson Hall, Box 353650, Seattle, WA 98195 USA, kasaba@uw.edu.

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families as “hamawand” and described them as “the most valiant, courageous, and intelligent of the Baban Kurd tribes.”<sup>1</sup> The *New York Times* headline suggests that in the closing years of the twentieth century, the Hemvends were still behaving in the independent and rebellious way in which they always had throughout their history.

Hemvends were not the only tribal group that, against all odds, tried to and succeeded in preserving some autonomy in the Ottoman Empire. There were other tribes who were also forcefully relocated in the course of the nineteenth century and who also found a way of returning home, even if this meant traveling very long distances under treacherous conditions. Tribes involved in pastoral nomadism remained a persistent feature of the Ottoman lands, and their continuous presence provides an interesting research question. Contrary to widespread assumptions, we cannot attribute their long-term presence only to their resistance to state authorities. In the course of its six-hundred-year history, the Ottoman Empire’s power ebbed and flowed depending on various factors. In this fluid context, the relationship between the Ottoman government and the tribes underwent different phases. At any point in time, this relationship could have complementary as well as adversarial aspects.

The topic of tribes in the Ottoman Empire in earlier periods, especially as it relates to the expansion of the empire, is somewhat better researched. This literature emphasizes the role of the mobile communities called *akıncı* who acted as tentacles of expansion in the frontier areas. The place of tribes within the interior networks of trade, production, and imperial organization, however, has not received the same attention. This is surprising because İnalçık estimates that as much as 27 percent of the population of Anatolia consisted of full or semi-nomadic people as late as in the 1520s.<sup>2</sup> If we move further away from the so-called core provinces of the Ottoman Empire and examine Eastern Anatolia, the Arab provinces, and beyond, we find that the percentage of nomadic population could be as high as 60 percent in some regions.

Being mostly involved in pastoral nomadism, these tribes were highly mobile, and their movement covered long distances. One clan could spend summers at the source of the Euphrates in the interior of part of Eastern Anatolia and then move south to the Syrian desert for the winter, a distance of over 600 miles. Some of the confederations of tribes were enormous, with as many as 30,000 to 40,000 individuals

1 Mark Sykes, “The Kurdish Tribes of the Ottoman Empire,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 38 (1908): 456.

2 Halil İnalçık and Donald Quataert, eds., *Social and Economic History of the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 35.

and sometimes several hundred thousand sheep and camels. The size and wealth of these tribal communities come into sharper focus if we remember that Ottoman law recognized 300 sheep as constituting a herd and that the state used this as the unit of accounting in assessing the liabilities of tribes. So pervasive was the nomadic presence that İnalçık describes tribes as “the backbone of the entire imperial organization,”<sup>3</sup> on the basis of not only their numerical strength, but also their mobility and their role in the local networks of production, trade, and administration across the Ottoman lands.

Hence, no matter how we look at them, tribes were not merely a residual group, nor did they survive only by resisting the central government. On the contrary, they fulfilled a number of important functions throughout the history of the Ottoman Empire. They mediated trade; they procured export items such as natural dyes; they provided animals and animal products; they acted as guards and messengers; they were part-time farmers, part-time manufacturers, and migrant workers; and they helped administer the lands where there was no other central authority to speak of. As such, tribes were courted and integrated into the empire and actively protected by the imperial state throughout its long history.

At this point, it may be helpful to consider what exactly “tribe” meant in the Ottoman context. Ottomans used overlapping administrative categories that were not always consistent, which makes this discussion particularly difficult. Some of the descriptions were based on identity and loosely on kinship. Under this heading, the term that the Ottomans used was *aşiret*, which is based on the belief that the group in question has descended from common ancestors. In order to facilitate administrative and especially taxation matters, those *aşirets* that were in Eastern Anatolia, Iraq, Syria, and further east in the Arab provinces were grouped as *Türkmens*, *Kurds*, *Arabs*, or *Bedouins*.

The two largest administrative units that the Ottomans recognized among the *Türkmens* and *Kurds* were the *ulus* or, sometimes, *il*. Of these, most prominent were the *Boz Ulus*, consisting largely, but not exclusively of *Türkmens*; and the *Kara Ulus*, consisting largely, but not exclusively of *Kurds*. *Ulus* confederations were divided into smaller groups, in descending order, as *boy* (sometimes *taife*), *cemaat*, and *kabile*.

*Aşirets* that had moved—either spontaneously or by force—to the west of the Kızılırmak River and to the Balkans, became semi-nomads

3 Halil İnalçık, “The Yürüks,” in *Oriental Carpet and Textile Studies II: Carpets of the Mediterranean Countries, 1400-1600*, eds. Robert Pinner and Walter B. Denny (London: Halı Magazine, 1986), 56.

(*yarı-göçebe* or *konar-göçer*) and were called *yürüks*. In popular literature and in some pseudo-scientific studies, this latter category is sometimes thought of as denoting an ethnic identity. Especially in the 1930s, there were studies commissioned by the Turkish government that set out to “prove” that *yürüks* were ethnically Turkish. Such studies were part of a futile campaign to claim for the newly constructed Turkish identity the many diverse peoples who were within the newly established borders of the republic.

In all these categories, to the extent that it was possible, the Ottoman government tried to accept and group the tribes as they were, without changing their status or imposing too many new and intrusive categorizations on them. In a pattern that was repeated in all empires, the Ottomans found it easier to rule such sparsely inhabited and marginally settled areas through the leaders of these inherently mobile groups. Hence, both functionally and administratively, an important aspect of tribe-state relations in the Ottoman Empire can be described as one of mutually reinforcing co-existence until the end of the seventeenth century.

The turning point in the empire’s relations with nomadic tribes and other mobile groups came in 1689, during the short tenure of the Grand Vizier Köprülü Fazıl Mustafa Paşa, when the first set of orders to settle nomadic tribes were issued. These orders targeted primarily those communities who were straddling the borderlands of the empire. With these orders the Ottomans were responding to the post-Westphalia international environment, in which European states were reinforcing their own borders and demanding the same from the Ottoman Empire.

As part of this policy, a special army primarily consisting of tribal groups and called *Evlâd-ı Fatihan* (Children of the Conquerors) was created on the Balkans in 1691. The Ottomans registered to the *Evlâd-ı Fatihan* as many of the *yürük* communities on the Balkans as they could, writing down their size, leaders, and recent history, and grouping them according to their military capabilities and the kind of tasks they were likely to perform in the army. The methods used in creating the *Evlâd-ı Fatihan* involved some inherently conflicting measures. Even though the Ottoman government was trying to induce the tribes to settle and to control them, registering tribal members within their tribes and keeping these units intact in the army undermined the long-term goals of the central government, by protecting the forces that pointed towards decentralization and devolution.

This incongruity between the goals of centralization and the methods that were used to achieve them would become typical of many of

the policies that the Ottoman government initiated in the years that followed. Consequently, throughout the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, even though Ottoman efforts to control and sedentarize the tribes became increasingly more comprehensive and intrusive, strengthening the center did not necessarily involve a weakening of the tribal periphery. On the contrary, the continuing prominence of tribal groups in the Ottoman campaigns enhanced their power in their localities and allowed them to play pivotal roles in some of the crucial conflicts of the last years of the empire.

For example, among those fighting with the Ottomans during the Crimean War was the *Caf* tribe which, with over 10,000 households at the turn of the twentieth century, was one of the largest Kurdish tribes in Southeastern Anatolia and Northern Iraq. Another interesting example is Kara Fatma of the Cerid tribe, who led her tribe to the front and was awarded by the central government for her services a silver medal and a monthly salary of 100 *kuruş*. When Kara Fatma visited İstanbul thirty years later, the *New York Times* described her as “the Amazon.”<sup>4</sup> The article about her reads as follows:

People just now in Constantinople are interested in the presence among them of Kara Fatma, the redoubtable female warrior (sic) of Kurdistan, who has come for a brief visit to the Turkish capital ... She is tall, thin, with a brown, hawk-like face; her cheeks are the color of parchment and seamed with scars. Wearing the national dress of the sterner sex, she looks like a man of 40, not like a woman who will never again see 75. Slung across her shoulders in Cossack fashion is her long sabre and sparkle on her breast, while the stripes across her sleeve show her to be a Captain in the Ottoman Army.

In 1864, another special fighting force called *Fırka-i Islahiyye* (Army of Reform) was created under the command of Ahmet Cevdet Paşa in order to fight the Kozanoğlu tribal confederation that had all but taken complete control of the Taurus mountain region. This was one of the most comprehensive campaigns organized by the Ottoman government in a tribal area in the nineteenth century. Even though the campaign essentially targeted a large tribal confederation, the *Fırka-i Islahiyye* also included large numbers of itinerant fighters with a tribal background, such as the *Zeybeks*, Circassians, and Kurds. The Ottoman officials reinforced the power of the chiefs of the Kozanoğlu clan in the course of

4 *The New York Times*, November 8, 1887.

these campaigns and negotiated with them in order to make the order of sedentarization more palatable. Needless to say, this became another factor in the augmentation of the power of the chiefs and in the reinforcement of sources of decentralization.

Following the passing of the new Provincial Law in 1864, the newly strengthened governors followed the model set by the central government. They invited Kurdish and Arab tribal sheikhs to provincial centers and gave them gifts and money in special ceremonies held in their honor. In return they hoped to gain the support of these chiefs in establishing the authority of the government and its representatives in the newly minted provinces. The tribal leaders freely used the fact that they were recognized by the central government and its representatives in furthering their own authority over their followers in their localities.

Even the Hemvends, who never gave up being a source of trouble for the central government, were employed in a similar fashion. Their chiefs were paid a salary, and they were allowed to import agricultural machinery without paying any customs. According to one author, as of 1881, the Ottoman government was paying 34,775 *kuruş* in monthly salaries to 140 tribal leaders and other notables.<sup>5</sup> These and other examples show that the strengthening of the central government and the continuing strength of the tribes went hand in hand throughout the nineteenth century. This was primarily due to the material constraints that gave the central government little independent means to enforce its directives.

Until the second half of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman government conceived of and implemented its tribal policies within an imperial framework, without an overarching vision of national identity, or even assimilation. It seems as if the Ottoman officials expected a sense of Ottomanism to develop as people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds were provided with space and the opportunity to interact with each other.

Ottoman officials had to abandon this vision as they realized that, unless steps were taken to transform the disparate subjects into a more closely integrated society, consisting of citizens with individual, not communal rights, the empire had little chance of survival in the modern world. Consequently, we see in the nineteenth century a growing attention not only to the sedentarization of tribes, but also to educating the tribal chiefs and their children in order to prepare them for closer

5 Andrew Gordon Gould, "Pashas and Brigands: Ottoman Provincial Reform and Its Impact on the Nomadic Tribes of Sothern Anatolia" (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, 1973), 201.

integration. As part of this effort, the Military Academy and the Faculty of Political Sciences designed special courses for the children of Arab sheikhs. The end of the nineteenth century also witnessed the establishment of special schools for the children of tribal leaders.

At the same time, the leaders of the Ottoman reform openly started to express strong anti-tribal sentiments. Nomads and tribal communities were now seen as living in a state of "heresy, savagery, and ignorance." Midhat Paşa, who first as governor of the Danube province and then of Baghdad put particular emphasis on the settlement of tribes and refugees, described nomadism and tribalism as primitive and "fit for animals."

It is possible that the continuing sedentarization of the tribes based on relevant institutions, specialized offices, and a worldview that accompanied and strengthened these policies could have continued throughout the rest of the nineteenth century, leading to a more orderly process of sedentarization, especially as the central government acquired the means to implement its policies. But this pattern was disturbed by another kind of migration: one that involved the forced movement of a large number of people and the creation of one of the largest waves of refugees in history.

What had first started in the late eighteenth century as a stream of people and picked up somewhat during the 1828-29 Russian War became a tidal wave of migration in the aftermath of the Crimean War and continued until the end of the empire. By some estimates as many as 900,000 people were forced to leave the Crimea and the Caucasus for the Ottoman Empire only in the eight years that followed the Crimean War.

These waves gained momentum in the 1870s and became particularly large following the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-78. As many as two million Muslims left Russia and the Balkans for the Ottoman lands after this war. The effects of this sudden increase were truly chaotic for the Ottoman Empire. For most of these people, the first stop was İstanbul, where they had to wait, poor, hungry, and wounded, before a permanent place could be found for them. The Turkish author Halit Ziya Uşaklıgil describes the heart-breaking scenes of cold and poverty that these refugees experienced in İstanbul:

Mosques, prayer halls, lodges and ruins all were filling slowly; death was persistent in claiming chunks of this humanity, but the spaces that were left behind was nowhere close to being sufficient to absorb the newcomers. Wherever there was a hole or a ditch, there went mothers hugging their babies, sick old people, and children crying

and holding on to their mothers' legs; all Turkish Muslims refugees from the fires war.<sup>6</sup>

Even while the Ottoman Empire was undergoing partitioning and forced migrations, the circulation of people within its borders continued throughout this period. In addition to pastoral nomads, migrant workers, especially Greeks and Kurds, moved back and forth between various regions of Anatolia and between Western Anatolia, the Aegean islands, the Greek mainland, and beyond. Pastoral nomads and other rural people traveled long distances to work in harvests in Southern Anatolia, and itinerant merchants continued to conduct business that straddled the rapidly changing borders of the old and new states.

Hence, despite the two-hundred-year-old efforts to create a sedentary order, people in the Ottoman Empire appeared to be more mobile than ever at the turn of the twentieth century. As Augustinos summarizes, "Asia Minor, both for Muslim and non-Muslim had become a land full of human wandering in the late nineteenth century."<sup>7</sup> These conditions became even more complicated at the turn of the twentieth century, when the end of the Ottoman Empire engendered another massive movement of people.

This last major phase of population movements consisted of three distinct waves, all of which were almost exclusively based on some aspect of identity. These were, first, the refugee movements during and after the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913; second, the mass expulsion and murder of almost the entire Armenian population of Anatolia during World War I; and, finally, the refugee flows and the exchange of Greek-Orthodox and Muslim populations during and after the Greco-Turkish War of 1919-1922.

In the ten years between the first Balkan War in 1912 and the end of Turkey's war with Greece in 1922, as many as 3.5 million Christians (Greeks, Bulgarians, Armenians) and Muslims in this area were forced to leave their homes. These migrations involved the "unmixing" of populations, whereby a large part of the Ottoman (as well as the Austrian-Hungarian) Empire was divided into nation-states. Ernest Hemingway who was a reporter for the *Toronto Star* watched the Greek refugees as they crossed the Maritza River into Greece:

6 Halit Ziya Uşaklıgil, *Kırk Yıl* (Istanbul: Varlık, 1987), 80.

7 Gerasimos Augustinos, *The Greeks of Asia Minor: Confession, Community, and Ethnicity in the Nineteenth Century* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1992), 22.

It is a silent procession. Nobody even grunts. It is all they can do to keep moving. Their brilliant peasant costumes are soaked and dragged. Chickens dangle by their feet from the carts ... A husband spreads a blanket over a woman in labor in one of the carts to keep off the driving rain. She is the only person making a sound. Her little daughter looks at her in horror and begins to cry. And the procession keeps moving.<sup>8</sup>

With the encouragement of intellectuals and several clergy, the political leaders tried to remake these lands and societies, so that people who lived in any one of these newly-created entities were as "ethnically pure" as possible. What this meant and how it would be achieved was not clear to anybody involved in this process. In the end, largely through arbitrary measures, by accidental means, and depending on contingent factors, people who lived in this part of the world were defined as belonging to different nationalities. Drawing these political and ideological boundaries inevitably excluded some people for reasons that had to do with their religion, ethnic background, or other factors that were neither clear nor consistent. But the consequences of these interventions were disastrous for those who found themselves on the wrong side of these real or imaginary lines of demarcation. They were expelled, destroyed, or forced to submit to the priorities of the dominant groups. The massive movement of populations that took place at the end of the empire resulted for the most part from these measures.

Thus, the Ottoman Empire began and ended with migration. But the two migrations that bracketed the empire were substantively different from each other. The migrations that were prevalent during the formative years of the empire were largely spontaneous. They helped built the empire and made mobility an integral part of it. The migrations of the nineteenth and twentieth century were, to a large extent, administered by states on the basis of their ideological priorities. For this reason, the latter wave could not but undermine the empire. In between, the Ottoman state was involved in a series of policies of sedentarization. While somewhat successful, these policies also reinforced the strength of the mobile groups that had always occupied such an important place in the Ottoman Empire. Consequently, the Ottoman state could never completely erase the fluid nature of Ottoman society. As a result, even though the nation-states that emerged appeared to be more compact and stable, the historically rooted spontaneous movements never disap-

8 Ernest Hemingway, *The Wild Years* (New York: Dell, 1967), 200.

peared completely and quickly re-emerged as a prominent characteristic of these societies.

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