

The Hamidiye Light Cavalry in the Ottoman Tribal Zone



Early in the spring of 1891, while heavy snows still blanketed their mountainous homeland, a group of influential Kurdish chieftains departed on a lengthy journey to the capital of the Ottoman Empire, whose borderlands they inhabited. It would be the longest voyage they had ever undertaken, through which they would blaze a trail for others. Used to a level of respect and deference accorded to them by their tribesmen and clients, the pomp and ceremony with which they were received in Istanbul was, however, a new experience. Dressed in special robes adorned with gold brocade befitting an audience with the sultan and caliph of the empire, these chiefs made their formal act of submission to His Imperial Majesty. In return they received decorations and the highest of distinctions during ceremonies that were at once solemn and festive, which were held in their honor.¹ Having prepared for this moment for weeks, it was the crown jewel in their long journey. They would stay in the capital for another two months, basking in the glory of their newly accorded honors, and would return to their distant homelands changed men.

Those who monitored these events, however, were very concerned. The British military attaché to the Ottoman Empire remarked that there was “general consensus of opinion native and foreign that a very large organisation with little or no modern discipline and with very shadowy government control is not likely to give good results and might lead to unpleasant incidents.”² Soon, protests flowed from the pens of Ottomans and foreign observers alike over the activities and indeed the existence of these special Kurdish tribal cavalry units—the Hamidiye, named after

Sultan Abdülhamid II himself. Most of these complaints surrounded the unsavory activities with which this militia came to be associated—lawlessness, violence, and land-grabbing. But a few more insightful observers began to notice how the dynamics created by this militia, and particularly its fuzzy relationship to state power, were affecting much larger processes, not only in the six eastern provinces in which they were active, but across the empire as well. In the words of one British diplomat, writing one decade after the militia was first organized,

There is no doubt that the Hamidieh movement, the appointing of tribal leaders as colonels of regiments, has had and is having a great effect in consolidating various broken factions of Kurdish tribes, and mitigating in a great measure the want of unity and tribal authority which supervened when the great “derebeys” were exterminated by the Turkish Government 50 or 60 years ago. . . . The Turks have taken great trouble to get rid of the remnants of the old ruling families in Kurdistan, but now the various Hamidieh cavalry leaders, themselves created and given rank by the Sultan, bid fair to occupy the places of the lost “derebeys,” and this, too, with good arms and a certain organization supplied them by the Government. . . .

The Kurds are quick to recognize the advantages of belonging to Hamidieh regiments, such as the possession of good arms, practical immunity from all civil law, and rank given to their chiefs; but for the other side of the contract they really care nothing, and use the advantages gained for furthering their own ends and advancing the Kurdish national spirit. When the Turks find themselves in difficulties elsewhere, the Kurds will bring this home to them.³

This leads us to ask the question: under what conditions does a state empower a group that it would ultimately prefer to suppress, and when does this actually serve to undermine the state’s very intentions to establish authority? How are all parties and institutions involved transformed in the process? What were the unique factors in the political geography that set the scene for this new militia? And related to all of these questions, what was special about the historical moment in which this story unfolded, or about the contingencies that coalesced to produce the dynamics that played out?⁴

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the Ottoman state perceived multiple threats—internal and external—in its eastern regions. Russia loomed large with its designs on eastern Anatolia. Kurdish tribes and sheikhly clans continued to act as “parallel authorities” in the region and demonstrated that the Ottoman state’s attempts throughout the nineteenth century to centralize and better manage its periphery had been largely unsuccessful.⁵ Armenian nationalist-revolutionary activity, however, proved to be the greatest perceived threat; many in Ottoman governing circles began to see the entire Armenian population as a fifth column,

one that not only challenged state authority on the domestic level but that could potentially serve as the Trojan horse that would bring the Russians in. The state took one of these “hostile” elements—Kurdish tribes—and tried to transform them from a local power that was a challenge to state authority into an arm of state authority itself in order to manage the other “threats.” While the state may have succeeded in attracting the temporary loyalty of those Kurdish tribes that it organized into a tribal militia called the Hamidiye Light Cavalry, the larger impact the militia had on local and state levels moved beyond anything that its creators had ever imagined: the on-the-ground conflict over resources that had begun unfolding just prior to the militia’s debut on the stage of eastern Anatolia was exacerbated, and violence increased in the region. A number of Armenian (and other Christian) peasants were uprooted and displaced along with many Muslim Kurdish peasants as well. Armenian revolutionaries were not suppressed, but instead were further antagonized and found greater *raison d’être* for their cause. Local officials faced more challenges in their task of maintaining peace, security, and the rule of law in their districts. Kurdish leaders, whose authority the state had been on a long campaign to diminish, were empowered as their tribal structures were unwittingly strengthened through the very process that sought to dismantle them. And while the state gained the temporary loyalty of select Kurdish chiefs, the long-term goal of binding the Kurds to the state was undermined through the very institution that sought to incorporate them. The Hamidiye organization left a lasting impact on the region and on state-society relations, and some of this impact arguably has lasted into the present day.

The Hamidiye Light Cavalry Regiments (Hamidiye Hafif Süvari Alayları) were an irregular militia composed of select Kurdish tribes, created in 1890 by Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909) and his trusted confidantes Şakir Pasha and the marshal (Mehmed) Zeki Pasha. The latter pasha was commander of the Fourth Army, based in the town of Erzincan, and was also related to the sultan through marriage. The Fourth Army was otherwise known as the Russian front, a vast and very important stretch of territory that extended approximately from the north of Mount Ararat all the way to the present “corner” where Iran, Iraq, and Turkey meet today, to Cizre in the southwest, to the town of Erzincan in the west. This land had rocky, steep mountains where pastoral tribes herded their flocks and cool plateaus where they grazed them in the summer. It was also agriculturally very rich in many areas, as well as symbolically fertile, as it was an extension of the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia—the scene of important biblical events and stories. It was the “cradle of mankind,” in the words of one traveler.⁶ But for the Ottomans, who chose to focus less

on the symbolic weight of this region than would their Turkish republican successors, this territory was mostly important for strategic reasons as the buffer between Ottoman dominions and those of empires to the east. It was the land that became the front line for many of the Ottomans' wars with their eastern neighbors, and the land where many of the battles were fought. And it was the land on which much blood was shed during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78, which erupted shortly after Sultan Abdülhamid II began his reign. It was the land seen as increasingly vital to the Ottomans as they tried to prevent the deepening trend of territorial losses from striking the empire's eastern frontier, and it was the land that was giving slow rise to the expression of Armenian nationalist activities.

It was also the land that was among the most difficult for the Ottomans to control. In spite of intensive efforts in the nineteenth century to promote administrative reforms aimed at the progressive centralization of the empire with particular attention to far-flung domains like Kurdistan, the region continued to be tricky, and in some parts impossible, to govern, tax, and conscript. Locals heeded their own community heads, mainly Kurdish tribal chiefs and sheikhs, particularly in the countryside, more than they did any Ottoman governors. In many parts these notables were the true "masters" of the country, as many travelers and other foreign observers noted.⁷

Against the backdrop of the particular importance attached to this territory as the nineteenth century neared its close, the Hamidiye Light Cavalry was established from among these "masters" of the country, or at least from potential "masters." Although the ostensible reason provided by the sultan for the new organization and arming of select Kurdish tribes was the protection of the frontier from external aggression through the expansion of regional military forces, there were actually a number of other goals the sultan and his associates hoped to accomplish through the Hamidiye Light Cavalry. It was, in fact, a manifold mission, not only to protect the frontier, as official statements suggested, and not only to suppress Armenian activities, as some contemporary observers and later historians have argued; nor was it only to bolster the ties of Islamic unity in the empire by creating a special bond between the sultan and the Kurds, as other authors have suggested. It was a mission organized for all of these reasons, and more. Perhaps most significant, it was intended to bring the region into the Ottoman fold and to ensure, by almost any means necessary, that it remained there. The Hamidiye would serve as the channel to this end, for it offered explicit advantages to its members to act in the interests of the Ottoman state, or at least not to act against them. In an era when the security of frontiers and their transition to bordered lands was of central significance in the wider project of modern state building, this

region gained new importance to the center, and the sultan decreed that all efforts should be spent to this end, in spite of the vast material, human, and international-relations costs that the Hamidiye venture would entail. These aims were to be accomplished through the arming and pampering of select Kurdish tribes, particularly their chiefs, who would now find it advantageous to turn down any offers to work for “the other side,” which the central Ottoman government saw as a distinct threat.

As the project unfolded, it was clear that other visions existed for the Kurdish tribes in the minds of the sultan, Şakir Pasha, Zeki Pasha, and many of their contemporaries. Revealing a worldview not unlike that of many of their contemporaries in other parts of the globe, they also envisaged the project as a civilizing mission—a means through which the “barbaric” tribes could be transformed into peaceful agriculturalists in body and Ottoman (indeed Turkish) “citizens” in spirit.⁸ The first step in this process was to settle the tribes, an undertaking that had been sporadically attempted by the Ottoman state for centuries. A few years into the enterprise, it also became apparent that through the Hamidiye venture two primary aims could be accomplished at once. The project could take advantage of trends already underway, namely the growing importance attached to land ownership and the changes in land-tenure practices that had already begun to unfold in several regions. Although the central government did not initiate the process whereby powerful local notables began to appropriate peasant holdings for themselves, the state certainly turned this development to its advantage. It did so by offering free reign to its supporters, here Hamidiye chiefs, to usurp the land of Armenian (and also Kurdish) peasants, with the long-term effect of dispossessing the Armenian element, which was increasingly viewed with suspicion. The state could then accomplish its goal of weakening the “internal enemies” in the threatened borderlands by depriving them of their means of subsistence and causing them to emigrate elsewhere so as to diminish or disperse their numbers. At the same time it provided material incentives for the Kurdish tribes to settle and remain loyal to the sultan and the empire.

The Hamidiye project continued to unfold not only for the duration of Sultan Abdülhamid II’s reign but well beyond. Even when the sultan was deposed in April 1909, his special project was not dissolved by the new rulers of the empire, but rather was given a new name, the Tribal Light Cavalry Regiments (*Aşiret Hafif Süvari Alayları*). Although leaders in the new regime had considered shelving the scheme, they instead settled for a reorganization of the militia, even if in reality the organization remained largely the same as it had been under the sultan they had just overthrown. When the Ottomans entered the First World War, the regiments took on

a new role, as they were no longer intended to repress domestic threats or stand against a vague external menace. Now faced with wartime conditions, they were deployed on several fronts, and also became identified with the mass murder and deportation of Armenians that took place during the war (known by Armenians as the Great Catastrophe). And although some of the militia's chiefs became disillusioned with the nascent Kemalist government after the war and joined the growing Kurdish nationalist movement, other Light Cavalry tribes joined the regular army in battling the Greek invasion, and were lauded for their participation in the Turkish War of Independence. It was not until after the war that this Kurdish cavalry officially ceased to exist by any name, although a version of village guards was established by Turkey, one successor state to the empire, soon after its declaration of independence. They were revived in 1984 to combat the PKK (the Kurdish acronym for *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, or the Workers' Party of Kurdistan) in southeastern Anatolia. The Village Guards in Turkey remain active today, thus lending contemporary significance to its historical legacy.

Over the course of the three-plus decades that spanned the life of this tribal militia, the Hamidiye Light Cavalry would impact the lives of its member tribesmen, their families, neighbors, clients, and the entire region. The Hamidiye regiments would also play a part in shaping the trajectories of Ottoman politics on regional, empire-wide, and even international levels. The militia would figure prominently in the transformation of the local power structure, and indeed the very social and political organization of Kurdish society itself. It would play a significant role in transforming the economic landscape through its effects on the nature of land tenure in the region. The militia organization impacted wider state-society relations in the late-Ottoman period, and is indeed an illuminating lens through which we can view the transformation of the Ottoman state in the nation-state moment. And last, it would serve as a model and precedent for the subsequent Kurdish tribal militias created by leaders of post-Ottoman states to contend with their own internal threats.

METHODOLOGY, HISTORIOGRAPHY, AND SOURCES

The relevance of the Hamidiye to present-day events not only piqued my interest in the topic, but also shaped the process through which my inquiry was conducted. Apparently due to the sensitivity of the topic, I was denied access to all Turkish research facilities, including the Ottoman Archives, for several years. My initial research was based, therefore, primarily upon extensive research conducted at the Public Record Office in London, the

French Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives (Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères) in Paris and Nantes, the French Ministry of Defense Archives (Archives du Ministère de la Défense) at Vincennes outside Paris, and also, albeit to a lesser extent, the Kurdish Institute (l'Institut Kurde) and the Nubar Pasha Library, also both of Paris, as well as the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. My research was additionally informed by published Ottoman materials, the Kurdish-Ottoman press, travel literature, missionary reports, and a variety of secondary sources in diverse languages. The British and French diplomatic sources on which my initial conclusions were largely based were taken with a note of caution. While extremely rich and descriptive, they nonetheless revealed the distinctly Orientalist bias of their authors, many (but not all) of whom saw the protection of the Armenians as a primary matter of interest, and whose reports on this region reflected this concern. Although this was the case, I believed that future research conducted in Ottoman archives would bear out my suggestions. Thankfully, in the summer of 2006 I was finally granted access to the Ottoman Archives of the Prime Ministry (Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi). The documents I obtained from diverse wings of the Ottoman bureaucracy not only confirmed my impression that I was on the right track, but they also served to strengthen the contentions I had made. The present study is based on all of these rich and diverse sources.

The political significance that the topic of the Hamidiye continues to carry has affected not only the present work but also earlier studies that have dealt either directly or indirectly with the Hamidiye question. Four main trends become apparent when examining previous treatment of the Hamidiye, many of which may be considered nationalist approaches or trends and all of which fail to regard this institution as part of a dynamic Kurdish society with its own historical processes. The first is the Armenian (or Armenophile) approach, which seeks to locate the Hamidiye in a narrative of the Armenian Genocide of 1915, and the events leading up to that year. The militia's empowerment against Armenians is provided in these works as evidence of a long-term Ottoman policy designed to uproot and annihilate the Armenians of the empire and as part of the larger attempt to document the culpability of the central government in these tragic events by showing how the troops, under the orders of the government, participated in the deportation and extermination of the Armenians in 1915 and also during the earlier massacres of 1894–96.⁹ The second approach may be called Turkish nationalist, which has generally sought, in the case of the Hamidiye in particular, to gloss over the unsavory activities with which the Kurdish tribal militia came to be associated (as this approach also dodges official activities in this regard). On occasion the Turkish-nationalist approach has also worked to employ them (and the

activities of Kurds in general) to deflect responsibility from the central Ottoman government in the Armenian Genocide and earlier episodes of anti-Armenian violence by blaming them, not on an organization maintained by the state, but on an unruly bunch of tribesmen, whose thirst for revenge drove them to violence.¹⁰ Others adopting this broader approach have also contrasted the despotic Hamidian regime with its successor, the Ottoman Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), out of which grew the leadership of the early Turkish republic.¹¹

The third approach may be called Kurdish nationalist. Proponents of this approach have generally not attempted to sidestep the question of the Hamidiye's role in regional violence, instead working to emphasize the parallel between the Hamidiye and the Village Guards in order to add punch to their argument that the state has long been playing the divide-and-rule card in its war against the Kurds. This approach also emphasizes the government's support of the objectionable activities with which this present-day Kurdish tribal militia has been associated.¹²

A fourth approach can also be discerned among writers in Turkey who, contrary to those who have characterized Sultan Abdülhamid II as a reactionary despot, have gone to the other extreme, representing him as a far-sighted ruler who should be admired for his efforts to preserve the territorial and economic integrity of a country under the siege of internal and external threats. This group of scholars is also particularly focused on the sultan's dedication to strengthening and elevating the position of Islam in state and society.¹³

None of these approaches are completely devoid of truth. As the "Armenophile" writers have asserted, the Hamidiye was indeed organized by the Ottoman government in part to be employed against its Armenian element. The regiments were, moreover, involved in extensive violence against Ottoman Armenians, and were also implicated in the mass murder, deportation, and looting that took place during the First World War. As the official Turkish line suggests, the Hamidiye regiments did often act in this regard without official orders from the state, and indeed in spite of attempts by some well-meaning local officials to prevent such atrocities. As the Kurdish camp submits, the parallels between the Hamidiye regiments and the Village Guards are truly striking on certain levels, and they reveal much about the state's historical relationship with its Kurdish population. And as the "Hamidian revivalists" suggest, Sultan Abdülhamid II did envision the Hamidiye as part of his greater drive for Islamic unity. When these characterizations of the Hamidiye stand alone, however, they tell only a slice of the story and also serve to skew our notions of what the Hamidiye was and why it is important to understand past and present history, as these approaches are too narrow and too imbued with politi-

cal and nationalist import to provide a broad and complex picture of this institution. Moreover, they impede our attempts to understand Kurdish society as a dynamic society with its own historical processes. In other words, in these narratives, Kurdish society is viewed only as it relates to “the other,” whether that other is the non-Kurdish neighbor or the government. Or worse, Kurdish society is seen as having no historical dynamics of its own. As one writer from this school has put it, “There is no such thing as Kurdish history.” All it consists of, he claims, are “various stories that recount tribal events and actions.”¹⁴

This study aims, in part, to rethink the history of the Hamidiye organization. It does not completely discard the aforementioned depictions of the Hamidiye, but rather nuances and adds to them in an attempt to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of this Kurdish tribal militia. However, the real (as opposed to incidental) contribution that I aim to offer readers is not simply a “better” or “more complete” history of the Hamidiye institution in and of itself, but rather, a more complex understanding of modern Ottoman state-building processes—processes whose far-reaching dynamics have not adequately been covered by scholarship to date. This seemingly peripheral militia organization was not only emblematic of, but also an important part of, the Ottoman expansion of what Giddens calls “administrative power” in its transition to a nation-state,¹⁵ and the related process of transforming the political geography and demography of its borderlands. This path was tortuous and had far-reaching consequences for locals, for the survival of the Ottoman state itself, and indeed for its successor states. Although the dynamics unleashed by the formation of this militia were often unintended, I will demonstrate that this case study not only illuminates the specificities of the modern Ottoman state-building narrative but also shows how much the Ottoman path had in common with that followed by other (often European) states as they made similar transitions. The Ottomans and many others perceived internal threats and attempted to cope with them; local power relations and identities were significantly transformed through the state-sponsored empowerment of certain groups; and violent conflicts previously understood to be ethnic or religious were at least partially about something much larger, here the conflict over resources. The Kurdish- and Armenian-inhabited Ottoman periphery became central to these processes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Because one key question that lies at the heart of these processes is what happens when a state empowers a group that it would rather suppress we need to adopt a more nuanced version of the state and of state-society relations—one that recognizes how states and societies transform one

another through their very interaction, how the state-society distinction is often extremely blurry, and particularly what makes states act in ways that seem counterintuitive. The work of Joel Migdal, for example, allows us “to understand the appearance of multiple sets of practices, many of which might be at odds with the image (and morality) of the state,”¹⁶ and how the “participation of the fragments of the state in such coalitions that intersect the state-society divide” contribute to a situation in which the “‘practices of the state’ may directly contradict the ‘idea of the state,’”¹⁷ and indeed, I would add, the very *interests* of the state. By handing the reins of state power, in a sense, to the tribal Kurds the state wished to suppress, the Ottoman state was contradicting the idea of itself (at least insofar as it “owned” state power). And the outcomes of this grant of power also demonstrated that it was undermining its own interests and image in both the domestic and the international spheres. For those who suggest that this should be seen in light of the larger Ottoman decline (as one more of many examples of the state’s inability to perceive and act on what was best for its preservation), Migdal’s approach again offers some nuanced perspective: “It is not simply poorly designed policies or incompetent officials or insufficient resources that explain the failures or mixed results of state policies. States must contend with . . . groupings . . . of opposition [that] have created coalitions to strengthen their stance, and these have cut right into the structures of states themselves. The resulting coalitional struggles have taken their toll: state policy implementation and the outcomes in society have ended up quite different from the state’s original blueprints.”¹⁸ This is because, as the Hamidiye project illustrates very well, the Ottoman state was not the monolithic actor that many have presumed it to be in much of the literature; rather, “the internal contradictions in the state’s practices created multiple political spaces that [local] populations could occupy and exploit depending on their assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of each.”¹⁹ In other words, local Kurdish chiefs possessed a great deal of agency in the affair, and as military brokers, instead of engaging in open acts of rebellion to pursue their agendas, they were able to harness the awesome power of empire to their own advantage.²⁰ But the story at hand is not simply about what happens when a state empowers a group that is a threat to it, for after all, states and other dominant elites have been making all kinds of “effort-bargains” for centuries. Rather, it is the specificity of *this* effort-bargain that took place in a particular political geography at a moment of transition not only in the status and conception of that geography but also in the wider transformation of the Ottoman state to a modern nation-state. And it was not only local and empire-wide power structures that were changing, but the very nature,

conception, and practice of power itself. Power and periphery intersected in a profoundly new manner in late-Ottoman Kurdistan, with many tragic short- and long-term results.

Some have argued that the location and terrain of Kurdistan have determined its relationship to the states (particularly the Ottoman state) that have incorporated and/or bordered the region. The political geography and terrain of Kurdistan have certainly been factors in these relationships, but we must be careful not to assign causal or deterministic features to this geography. As Balta points out, it is not the “inherent characteristics of physical terrain” that are of essential note, but rather how states (and I would add, locals) *respond* to that political geography.²¹ This does not mean, however, that space and spatial relationships are unimportant; to the contrary, this study finds that the location of the internal threats that the Ottomans sought to overcome was, in fact, key, but it was essential in a particular moment and *became* fundamental through specific dynamics. The Kurds lived on the frontiers of empires for centuries, and then in the borderlands of these empires (Ottoman, and Safavid then Qajar Iran) for several more centuries. During the period in which the story at hand unfolded, this borderland region was in the process of becoming a *bordered* land,²² a transformation that is indeed part of the story I tell in this book. Adelman and Aron remind us to make the distinction between “frontiers” and “borderlands,” and to historicize the transition from frontier to borderland to bordered land.²³ A few Ottomanists who work on borderlands have recognized these differences and historicized this process, and they have certainly made important contributions to our understanding of Ottoman peoples in borderland regions and center-periphery relations. They have generally not, however, problematized these distinctions in a meaningful way, relying in their analyses on more mainstream notions of core-versus-periphery.²⁴ The internal and external threats that the Ottomans perceived and tried to quell in their militia project were not pressing earlier, when the region was indeed a frontier; they were urgent precisely during this moment when Kurdistan was one of the Ottoman territories that was changing from borderland to bordered land, a process that has been shown to be intimately connected with the transition to nation-statehood.²⁵ It was the goal of modern state-crafters to create and expand state spaces and to incorporate or at least neutralize the nonstate spaces it could claim, but perhaps not yet *govern*,²⁶ as “these stateless zones . . . played a potentially subversive role, both symbolically and practically.”²⁷ It was in this context that the Ottoman state felt a greater need to strengthen its grip on the region—the “tribal zone,” as Ferguson and Whitehead have dubbed it—and incorporate it into its modern state-building project.²⁸