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Kurds and Ottomans: Love and Revenge

Whoever tracks the history of the Kurds realizes the crime of geography on the development of Kurdish history. We do not mean here only the rugged geographical environment, and the mountainous nature of most of the lands of Kurdistan, but we also mean the presence of most of the Kurds between two great political giants: those who rule Persia, and those who rule Asia Minor. This will be evident in modern and contemporary history in the presence of the Kurds between two conflicting groups: the Safavid state in Iran, and the Ottoman Empire in Asia Minor and the Arab world. There are Kurdish regions not only in Asia Minor, but also within the Arab world in Iraq and Syria.

Because the majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims, the Ottoman Sultan Selim I will take advantage of this sensitive matter and include in his side the Kurdish emirates that lie on the border between the Ottoman Empire and the Shiite Safavid state. This already happened when Kurds allied with the Ottoman Empire against the Safavids, and this was particularly evident in the famous battle of Galdiran (Çaldıran Muharebesi) in 1514. Sultan Selim I defeated Shah Ismail Al-Safawi in this battle, and the Kurds asked the Ottomans to return the favor. Sultan Selim I preserved the survival of the Kurdish emirates and granted them a kind of autonomy, with these emirates recognizing allegiance and subordination to the Ottoman Empire.

Despite this, the Kurdish emirates suffered greatly from the renewed Ottoman-Safavid conflict. The Kurdish lands became a land of battles between the Ottoman and Safavid armies, and the Safavids did not forget the alliance of the Sunni Kurds with the Ottomans.

However, the cordiality between the Kurds and the Ottoman Empire did not last long, as the Ottoman Sultan Murad IV sent his armies to subjugate the Kurdish emirates directly to the Ottoman central rule. The Kurds considered this a serious violation of the history of relations between the Kurdish emirates and the Ottoman Empire since the era of Selim I, while the Ottoman authorities justified what they did by saying that these campaigns were intended to discipline the Kurdish princes who rebelled against the authority of the state.

The relations between the Kurds and Istanbul worsened throughout the nineteenth century, where the Ottoman Empire, as a result of its weakness and repeated foreign defeats, adopted a policy of centralization in an attempt to preserve its remaining emirates. At the same time, the nineteenth century was the era of the growth of nationalities par excellence, and from here a sharp clash will occur between Kurdish nationalism and Turkish Turanian nationalism, just as the clash also occurred with Arab nationalism and Armenian nationalism.

This clash will manifest itself in its worst degree in the time of Sultan Abdul Hamid II, who tried to rule the emirates in a strict and powerful manner, in a last attempt to save the state from collapse, from his point of view. The revolution of the Kurdish sheikh Al-Nahri (Ubeydelayê Nehrî) against the Ottoman rule, and the suppression of the Ottoman authority to it, is the biggest manifestation of the bloody clash between the two nationalities: the Kurdish and the Turanian Turkish.

The Kurds accuse the Ottoman authority of carrying out evictions and forced displacement of many Kurdish tribes and families outside the Kurdish lands, and of population transfers, which constitute an attack on the rights of the Kurds. On the other side, the Ottoman Empire viewed the matter as an attempt by the Ottoman authority to discipline some Kurdish rebels, and to restore the prestige of the state towards these lands.

Anyway, the conflict of nationalities will increase with the beginning of the twentieth century and the weakness of the Ottoman Empire, and its inability to control the internal affairs of various emirates. This may be reflected in the terrible clash between the Armenians, the Ottoman Empire and the Kurds. The Armenians accuse the Ottomans of perpetrating massacres against them, while the Ottomans deny this, and accuse the Kurds of being the ones who attacked the Armenians during their displacement and crossing the Kurdish lands. This is how we reached the climax of the clash of nationalities before the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of World War I.