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The Uprising of Sheikh Obaidullah Nahri and the Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism (A Historical and Sociological Analysis)

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Article Info		Abstract:
Received	2025-12-28	
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Keywords		<p>The Kurdish question as a nation without a state has always been a key point in conflict and struggle in the Middle East and the region as a whole. The history of the Kurds is full of clashes and struggles aimed at gaining the right to self-determination. The uprising of Sheikh Obaidullah Nahri is regarded as one of the most important events in the modern history of the Kurds and has been the subject of extensive scholarly debate, particularly over whether it represents the rise of Kurdish nationalism or should instead be comprehended as a mainly religious uprising. Therefore, this study adopts a historical-sociological approach to examine the emergence of Kurdish nationalism. It also seeks to deliver an academic reassessment of Kurdish nationalism and its early appearances, relying on historical evidence to either corroborate or challenge claims regarding the nationalist character of the revolution. For this purpose, this study employs causality as a method and theory developed by Max Weber.</p> <p>The results indicate that the uprising had a strong and positive influence on Kurdish demands for political autonomy. However, many historians, Kurdologists, and Middle Eastern specialists argue that Sheikh Obaidullah’s struggle alone is insufficient to definitively classify the uprising as the beginning of Kurdish nationalist consciousness. Nevertheless, despite the inability of Sheikh Obaidullah’s social, religious, and political struggles to fully realize Kurdish national objectives, the uprising is still regarded as a crucial initial stage in the early experience of the emergence of Kurdish nationalism during this period.</p>
Kurdish Nationalism, Sheikh Obaidullah Nahri, Sociological-Historical Analysis, Conflict		
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Introduction:

The historical development of the Kurdish people is a protracted movement for self-determination, political autonomy, and cultural unity in a territory that has long been the object of geopolitical competition and foreign influence. Kurdish people, who have been scattered across present-day Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria, have continued to maintain a unique identity shaped by language, tribal structure, religion, and other associated cultural practices. Although these are unifying forces, Kurdish society is historically divided by geographic dispersion, inter-tribal warfare, and the hegemony of outside forces. This has often limited the ability to be politically mobilized in a sustained manner and to achieve power consolidation. However, periods of collective organization and resistance have existed in the history of the Kurdish people, not merely as exercises in social endurance, but due to a perceived need for unified resistance.

One of the most important initial examples of mobilization is the late nineteenth-century uprising led by Sheikh Obaidullah Nahri. This period also witnessed major regional changes: the slow weakening of the Ottoman Empire, the undermining of the old Kurdish emirates, and the increasing involvement of European countries in the geopolitical structure of the Middle East. The leadership of Sheikh Obaidullah emerged within a complex socio-political environment characterized by tribal loyalties, religious authority, and foreign intervention. As a Sufi leader belonging to one of the most powerful Naqshbandi orders, he possessed strong spiritual and social influence that enabled him to transcend tribal affiliations and promote a pan-Kurdish sense of unity. His authority extended beyond religious circles into the political arena, as he sought to organize Kurds in pursuit of independence and resistance against oppressive political systems.

The uprising planned by Sheikh Obaidullah highlights the complex relationship between local and foreign forces that shaped the early development of Kurdish nationalist awareness. His leadership cannot be reduced to a response to immediate political or economic grievances; rather, it reflects an understanding of a broader historical process in which Kurdish autonomy had been suppressed for centuries. Ottoman and Qajar centralization policies, combined with high taxation and economic strain, created widespread discontent. At the same time, the abolition of Kurdish emirates removed traditional political leadership, which was increasingly replaced by religious figures such as Sheikh Obaidullah. Political opportunity, social influence, and a nascent collective identity converged to form the foundations of early Kurdish nationalism. The mobilization activities of Sheikh Obaidullah extended beyond tribal recruitment. He organized conferences in which Kurdish tribal leaders discussed shared political strategies, demonstrating a level of political awareness that was uncommon in the region at the time. His correspondence with the international community further reflects an awareness of the international dimensions of Kurdish political aspirations. Recognizing the limitations of internal mobilization, he sought external support, highlighting the strategic importance of diplomacy and international engagement in the struggle for Kurdish autonomy. These actions underscore the dual nature of his leadership, combining religious authority with emerging nationalist ambitions and political initiative.

To understand the uprising of Sheikh Obaidullah, it is necessary to adopt a multidimensional analytical framework, as it encompasses historical, political, and social dimensions. The uprising was not the result of a single factor; rather, it emerged from the interaction of multiple interconnected conditions. The dismantling of Kurdish emirates, the rise of Naqshbandi religious authority, imperial centralization policies, and the socioeconomic discontent caused by military conflicts collectively created the preconditions for rebellion. Furthermore, the gradual crystallization of Kurdish identity based on language and tribal affiliations significantly influenced the reception of his leadership. These interrelated variables demonstrate how historical context, social structures, and individual agency converge to produce significant political events.

This paper presents a historical-sociological case study of the uprising led by Sheikh Obaidullah Nahri to explain the rise of Kurdish nationalism. It examines how religious authority, tribal structures, and collective identity interacted to foster early nationalist consciousness through an analytical assessment of his leadership, organizational strategies, and the socio-political environment in which he operated. The study also situates Sheikh Obaidullah's movement within the broader history of the Kurds, demonstrating that although it was ultimately suppressed, it established important precedents for future Kurdish political and nationalist movements.

By doing so, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how Kurdish nationalism originated and developed. It argues that Kurdish political mobilization was not driven solely by economic suppression, tribal loyalty, or religious orientation, but by the convergence of multiple forces that created a framework for collective action and political expression. The discussion of the uprising led by Sheikh Obaidullah Nahri provides insight into how tradition, leadership, and nationalist sentiment contributed to the development of regional history during the modern period.

Research problem:

The uprising of Sheikh Obaidullah Nahri in 1880 is a highly significant but highly disputed event in Kurdish history. There have been scholarly arguments presenting contrasting explanations of the incident as a mainly religious uprising, a tribal reaction to imperial centralization, or a precursor to Kurdish nationalism. However, notwithstanding its historical importance, the lack of sociological investigation has prevented a comprehensive placement of the uprising within the context of the broader socio-political and historical changes of the late nineteenth century. The existing literature has either exaggerated its religio-political aspects or subsumed it into the history of early nationalist movements, thus leaving unresolved questions regarding the structural and cultural preconditions that enabled Kurdish mobilization.

The rise of Kurdish nationalism in this era is particularly difficult to define due to the coexistence of Ottoman and Qajar domination, the weakening of Kurdish emirates, and the scarcity of written records from the period. Furthermore, the dynamics between tribal allegiance, religious authority, and regionalism make it difficult to classify the uprising as either nationalist or strictly religious. A Weberian historical-sociological model offers a nuanced understanding of how structural conditions, social organization, and charismatic leadership interact to produce meaningful social action. The convening of tribal congresses by Sheikh Obaidullah, the establishment of the Kurdish Council, and communication with British authorities illustrate the relationship between local agency and external forces; however, the extent to which these activities reflect proto-nationalist consciousness remains debatable.

Therefore, this article presents a historical-sociological analysis of whether Sheikh Obaidullah Nahri's uprising marked the beginning of Kurdish nationalism or should instead be understood as a precursor to its later emergence. The analysis is based on historical sources and seeks to provide a critical evaluation of this crucial issue in Kurdish history. Based on this, the following questions are posed:

- What historical, social, and political factors contributed to the uprising of Sheikh Obaidullah Nahri?
- What was the impact of his organisational activities and religious power on Kurdish mobilisation?
- Did the uprising of Sheikh Obaidullah Nahri represent the beginning of Kurdish nationalism, or was it a precursor to its later emergence?

Objectives of the Study:

This paper attempts to examine the revolution of Sheikh Obaidullah Nahri by determining the historical, social, and political circumstances that conditioned it and evaluate its importance in the proto-nationalist history of Kurdish identity. Specifically, the research is concerned with:

- The social and historical circumstances that supported the revolution.
- The role of religious leadership and tribal organisation in mobilising the Kurdish society.

- How far the revolution testifies to the emergent Kurdish nationalist ambitions.

Significance of the Study:

This work is important in terms of its historical-sociological redefinition of the uprising led by Sheikh Obaidullah Nahri and its consequences for the formative period of Kurdish nationalism. Using a Weberian causality model, the study goes beyond traditional religious or political explanations, demonstrating how structural circumstances, religious authority, and collective mobilization interacted in late nineteenth-century Kurdistan. The theoretical contribution consists of a critique of linear and Eurocentric interpretations of nationalism, showing that nationalist manifestations can emerge through traditional and religious leadership structures, not solely through secular institutions.

The study also offers an empirical analysis of Sheikh Obaidullah's uprising as a proto-nationalist movement resulting from the decline of Kurdish emirates and the consequent expansion of Ottoman and Qajar bureaucratic authority. In this respect, it elucidates one of the most important yet controversial events in Kurdish history, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the historical foundations of Kurdish political consciousness. As a result, the work contributes to Kurdish studies, the history of the Middle East, and the sociological comparative study of nationalism.

Methodology:

The idea of causality as presented by Max Weber is particularly appropriate to apply to the present study because the uprising of Sheikh Obaidullah Nahri cannot be precisely defined as a nationalist uprising or attributed to a single cause of action. Rather, it is a historically observable social phenomenon that is the product of a set of overlapping forces. The concise explanation presented below can be included in the methodology or theoretical framework section. Furthermore, Max Weber's conceptualization of causal explanation rejects reduction to a single determinant, such as economic determinism, religious reductionism, or primordial nationalism. The present article identifies the presence of several interdependent causal processes, including political centralization under Ottoman and Qajar rule, economic stress in the form of taxation and land control, religious authority and moral leadership, tribal structure, and a newly emerging sense of collective Kurdish identity. By employing Weber's concept of adequate causation, it demonstrates that these variables collectively created a historical context that facilitated the uprising, without asserting that the revolution was predestined.

The historical approach to causality adopted by Max Weber emphasizes the complexity of social phenomena and the presence of multiple determinants influencing historical events. Weber's methodology integrates both causal analysis and interpretive understanding (*Verstehen*), making it necessary to identify objective conditions while also examining the subjective meanings and intentions underlying human action. Moreover, according to Weber, a comprehensive understanding of history requires that human action be evaluated within its social context. He argued that social phenomena cannot be adequately understood solely in terms of external conditions; rather, an interpretive lens is required to explain the intentions and subjective meanings that inform human behavior (Weber, 1922: 33).

Furthermore, in Weber's framework, historical causality is not explained merely by reference to objective antecedents such as economic or social structures. It also requires an understanding of the motivating forces behind individual and collective behavior, namely motivations and values. The importance of *Verstehen* in this regard cannot be overstated: it is only through grasping the deeper meanings behind actions that scholars can reconstruct the broader socio-historical context of events (Weber, 1922: 40). Additionally, Weber opposed reductionist explanations of historical events that attribute them to a single cause; instead, he maintained that social and historical phenomena result from complex interactions among multiple determinants. These include material conditions, cultural beliefs, religious ideologies, and

political institutions (Weber, 1922: 45). Accordingly, historical causality is multivariate, with each variable influencing historical outcomes.

In summary, Weber's contribution to sociology lies in his recognition of the role of culture and religion in shaping social change. In his study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber demonstrated how religious beliefs can influence economic organization and social structures (Weber, 1905: 92). Similarly, in the context of Kurdish nationalism, Weber's perspective can be applied to examine how the religious background of Sheikh Obaidullah shaped his nationalist aspirations and his capacity to mobilize followers. The fusion of religion and politics in Sheikh Obaidullah's actions may thus be interpreted, from a Weberian analytical perspective, as a distinctive form of social agency that integrates ethno-religious and political objectives.

Literature Review:

Historical Background of the rise and spread of the Naqshbandi sect:

Religious belief has historically been one of the most defining characteristics of the Kurdish people, as evidenced by the strong presence and rapid expansion of various Sufi orders among them (Bruinessen, 1992; McDowall, 2004; Jwaideh, 2006). According to McDowall (2004), until 1800 AD, the Qadiri order was the only dominant Sufi order in Kurdistan. However, historical records indicate that the Naqshbandi order began spreading rapidly in Kurdistan after this period (Bruinessen, 1992; Olson, 1989). Martin van Bruinessen (1992: 225) attributes this rapid expansion to the strong spiritual appeal of the order and the high moral character of its sheikhs, as perceived by many Naqshbandi followers.

The Naqshbandi order dates back to the early fourteenth century, when a prominent Central Asian Sufi sheikh, Baha'uddin Naqshband, was born in a village near Bukhara (Trimingham, 1971; Algar, 1991). He was initially affiliated with the Khawajagan Sufi school of thought, which later became the Naqshbandi order (Algar, 1991; Bruinessen, 1992). The popularity of the Naqshbandi order, particularly in Kurdistan, is closely connected to the influence of Maulana Khalid of Sharazoor (Karim, 2019: 60; Jwaideh, 2006). Maulana Khalid studied under Shah Abdullah of Delhi and played a crucial role in spreading the teachings of the Naqshbandi order after returning from India in 1811 (Bruinessen, 1992; Olson, 1989). He moved from Sulaymaniyah to Baghdad and later to Damascus, thereby transforming the Naqshbandi order from a local Sufi sect into a large organization throughout the Ottoman Empire (Bruinessen, 1992; McDowall, 2004).

The political process in Kurdistan during which the Ottoman state eroded and dismantled Kurdish emirates, created a power vacuum in central Kurdistan (Jwaideh, 2006; McDowall, 2004). Naqshbandi sheikhs became key actors during this period of political instability (Olson, 1989; Bruinessen, 1992). Three prominent Naqshbandi sheikhly families the Sayyids of Nahri, the Barzan sheikhs, and the Barzanji sheikhs emerged as major forces in Kurdish politics (McDowall, 2004; Jwaideh, 2006). Furthermore, due to their affiliation with Sunni Islam, Naqshbandi sheikhs maintained a close and generally positive relationship with the Ottoman state, which helped them gain greater influence in both religious and political spheres (Olson, 1989; Bruinessen, 1992).

Sheikh Abdullah Nahri as a religious and national figure:

Sheikh Obaidullah was the son of Sheikh Sayyid Taha, who was the son of Sheikh Shihabuddin. He lived in Nahri, which is located in the Shamzinan territory (Bruinessen, 1992; McDowall, 2004). Sheikh Sayyid Taha had already established a sheikhdом in Nahri, and when he died, his son, Sheikh Obaidullah, took over his leadership role in the region as the leader of the Naqshbandi order (Bruinessen, 1992; Jwaideh, 2006). In addition, in his book *A Modern History of the Kurds*, McDowall (2004) states that Sheikh Obaidullah Nahri is often considered the first great Kurdish nationalist, although he finds no conclusive evidence to support

this claim. However, his movement can be viewed as a primitive form of Kurdish nationalism (McDowall, 2004; Olson, 1989).

There were a number of reasons that contributed to the rise of the influence and prestige of Sheikh Obaidullah. Kurdish emirates had been suppressed, and the absence of a Kurdish national leader created a political vacuum (Jwaideh, 2006; Bruinessen, 1992). This situation was further exacerbated by the economic crisis that followed the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878) (McDowall, 2004; Olson, 1989). The destruction caused by the war, particularly in the north-eastern regions, led to widespread social and economic devastation. Violence, famine, epidemics, and disease characterized this period and contributed to the fragmentation of Kurdish society (McDowall, 2004; Jwaideh, 2008). The failure of those in power to address these crises further intensified Kurdish demands for leadership and created the conditions under which Sheikh Obaidullah emerged as an influential figure (Jwaideh, 2008: 171).

Sheikh Obaidullah led a revolt against Qajar rule in 1880 in response to its oppressive policies (Olson, 1989; McDowall, 2004). He launched an incursion into Iran but was eventually captured by the Ottoman Empire and taken to Istanbul (Bruinessen, 1992; McDowall, 2004). Although he was arrested, his detention was reportedly well received by the local population. In 1882, the Ottomans sent him to Mecca, where he later died, despite repeated requests from the Iranian government for his extradition (McDowall, 2004; Jwaideh, 2006).

Theoretical Framework:

The development and the revolt of Sheikh Obaidullah Nahri can be interpreted as a coincidence of both internal and external factors that preconditioned this salient event in modern Kurdish historiography (McDowall, 2004; Bruinessen, 1992). Sheikh Obaidullah was the traditional religious aristocracy that formed a central part of the consolidation of his dominium and power in the region (Bruinessen, 1992; Jwaideh, 2006). His leadership was not only an expression of individual power but also a result of the wider socio-political processes (McDowall, 2004). The phenomenon of causality gives an outline to explain the interaction between social phenomena and historical events (Weber, 1978). Isajiw (2002) argues that all events depend on antecedent conditions, either internal or external, hence demonstrating the complex interrelations that shape historical paths. Similarly, Max Weber views causation as a heuristic, where one cause out of a number of causes can explain an event (Weber, 1949; Kalberg, 2005). He also distinguishes causal necessity, where the lack of a certain cause does not always change the results, and causal opportunity, where a certain factor is decisive to the occurrence of an event (Shilling and Mellor, 2001:89). Using these sociological paradigms in the case of the uprising by Sheikh Obaidullah, one can see that various variables led to his rise and the subsequent fall (Bruinessen, 1992; Olson, 1989). A prominent element was the unremitting geopolitical rivalry in the area, with the most notable being the contest between the Ottoman Empire, which was backed by the Western powers (Britain and France), and her enemies (including the Qajar Empire of Iran) (McDowall, 2004; Jwaideh, 2006). The next one is that the Western powers, in their quest to achieve their political and economic interests, extended their influence in the east, specifically in the Persian Gulf (Anderson, 2013; Rodinson, 1981).

These tensions were further fueled by internal crises rocking the Ottoman as well as the Qajar empires (Pamuk, 1987; McDowall, 2004). Both empires had been marked by grave economic instability, which was mostly caused by the archaism of feudal systems, and by military casualties caused by prolonged warfare (Pamuk, 1987; Quataert, 2005). The introduction of the centralization policies by Sultan Mahmud II increased political turmoil, since they threatened to disorganize the power structure in various parts of the country (Quataert, 2005; Jwaideh, 2006). All these circumstances led to the spread of poverty, famine, and social degradation, creating a climate whereby the people yearned for a leader who could solve their plight (Bruinessen, 1992; McDowall, 2004).

It is against this context that Sheikh Obaidullah came into the limelight as a religious and political leader who rallied people to his cause (Bruinessen, 1992; Olson, 1989). Additionally, he had leadership based not merely on religious authority but on a broader desire that the Kurdish people were subjected to, with the aim of opposing oppression and alleviating the socioeconomic suffering they had undergone (Jwaideh, 2006; McDowall, 2004). This means that his revolution can be seen as a reaction to the given political situation and a certain historical conflict (Kalberg, 2005).

Traditional authority of Sheikh Obaidullah Nahri:

Max Weber recognizes traditional authority as a kind of power that obtains its legitimacy through antiquarian customs, traditions, and the established socio-political culture of a society (Weber, 1978; Kalberg, 2005). Such systems have authority that rests on individuals, families, or tribes based on social norms that legitimize their authority to rule (Weber, 1947; Bendix, 1960). This is power that is not supported by constitutional law or democratic elections, but by traditions that are deeply rooted and compel people to follow (Al-Hassan, 2005:103; Weber, 1978). These traditions ensure that the ruler, along with his or her family or tribal network, retains power using the concept of legitimizing their rule as an assurance of society's well-being, stability, and prosperity (Bendix, 1960; Kalberg, 2005).

The power of Sheikh Obaidullah can be interpreted, in this regard, as being a kind of traditional religious power (Bruinessen, 1992; Jwaideh, 2006). Though the title "sheikh" was more of a religious title, according to Olson (1989:1–2), his leadership also included nationalist interests, such as the ambition to make the Kurdish nation independent, which was not only a religious leadership title, but also a nationalist one (McDowall, 2004; Olson, 1989). In the past, Sheikh Obaidullah had inherited a religious-traditional history of the Naqshbandi Sufi order that had been spreading in the area since the beginning of the 19th century (Bruinessen, 1992; Algar, 1991).

It is possible to trace the Naqshbandi movement in Kurdistan as a result of the impact of Maulana Khalid of Sharazoor, who, upon returning to India after studies under Shah Abdullah of Delhi, came back in 1811 (Bruinessen, 1992; Karim, 2019). He later went on to Sulaymaniyah, Baghdad, and Damascus to make Naqshbandi teachings a major religious and social movement in the Ottoman Empire (McDowall, 2004; Bruinessen, 1992). The sect gained thousands of followers and Sufi adepts within a short time, making it even more powerful (Trimingham, 1971; Algar, 1991).

Modern degradation of Kurdish emirates in the Ottoman Empire led to a vacuum of power in central Kurdistan, which was intended to be occupied by Naqshbandi sheikhs, such as Sheikh Obaidullah (Jwaideh, 2006; McDowall, 2004). After his father, Sheikh Sayyid Taha, passed away, Sheikh Obaidullah took over the Naqshbandi order (Bruinessen, 1992; Jwaideh, 2006). This capability gave him power, both religious and a fair share of social, economic, and political influence (Olson, 1989; McDowall, 2004). Consequently, he had a great deal of control over a large part of Kurdistan, which made him one of the major leaders in both the religious and political arenas (Bruinessen, 1992; Jwaideh, 2006).

Previous Studies:

According to earlier studies and literature, the uprising of Sheikh Obaidullah Nahri (1880–1881) has received the attention of scholars as one of the first massive political mobilizations of the Kurds in the late Ottoman era. Earlier researchers discussed the revolution in terms of historical, political, and sociological interpretations, highlighting that it was linked to the centralization of the state, the role of religion, and the early development of Kurdish collective identity. Despite variations in explanations by the researchers, a majority of them concur that the movement is a critical moment of transition in the development of Kurdish nationalism.

Among the oldest and most influential works on this topic is that of Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development*. Jwaideh describes the revolution of Sheikh Obaidullah as part of

the broader Ottoman administrative reform and regional intrigues. Through this, he maintains that the revolt by Obaidullah was the first occasion in which Kurdish political demands were expressed in the name of a common Kurdish interest, rather than tribal or local interests. In his letters to foreign nations, Sheikh Obaidullah clearly mentioned the Kurds as an independent people who deserved independent administration. Although Jwaideh does not deny the religious and tribal roots of the uprising, he focuses on the fact that it was a political innovation and offered an early manifestation of Kurdish national consciousness (Jwaideh, 2006:63–72). This is what has led to subsequent study; nevertheless, it has been heavily criticized as well.

In Agha, Shaikh and State, Martin van Bruinessen provides a more sociologically nuanced account. Instead of considering the revolution as a full-fledged nationalist movement, van Bruinessen describes it as a proto-national event determined by structural changes in Kurdish society. He also stresses the importance of Naqshbandi Sufi networks and the loss of independence of Kurdish tribal and religious elites under the centralized Ottoman and Qajar powers. Van Bruinessen holds that Sheikh Obaidullah did not actively attempt to build a nation-state in the modern sense; rather, nationalist discourse was an unanticipated result of social action. This explanation is very similar to the idea of causality introduced by Max Weber, according to which social consequences can far outshine the intentions of the people who act (van Bruinessen, 1992:184–195). Van Bruinessen's work is especially useful for describing how the power of religion was converted into ethnic political mobilization.

In A Modern History of the Kurds, David McDowall also sees the uprising as a major point in history, although he takes a middle ground between nationalist and traditional interpretations. McDowall indicates that Sheikh Obaidullah presented his revolution both through Islamic legitimacy and ethnic terms, which had never been used before. His argument is that although the uprising did not have modern organizational forms or mass nationalist ideologies, it still introduced the concept of Kurdistan as a political territory, not merely a geographical one (McDowall, 2004:53–59). According to McDowall, the symbolic significance of the revolt is important, and its discursive legacy was more significant than its immediate political consequences.

Hakan Özoğlu, in *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State*, provides a more critical account. To place the uprising of Sheikh Obaidullah in context, Özoğlu highlights the rise of Ottoman elite opposition to the centralization policies of the Ottoman Empire after the Tanzimat reforms. He claims that the interests of local notables during the nineteenth century were the main reason why Kurdish revolts were carried out: to protect their power against the growing bureaucratic state. In this respect, nationalism did not become the main driving force of the revolution but a by-product. Özoğlu warns that retroactively applying the contemporary concept of nationalism to pre-modern movements is misleading and highlights the importance of historical context (Özoğlu, 2004:98–107). His evaluation helps to reveal the structural reasons for the uprising and challenges its nationalist nature.

Hamit Bozarslan also problematizes the nationalistic interpretation in his works on political violence and Kurdish movements. Bozarslan maintains that the revolution by Sheikh Obaidullah was plagued by internal disunity, tribal politics, and a lack of a coherent political program; these factors hindered its ability to transform into a long-term nationalist movement (Bozarslan, 2008:41–45). However, he does not fail to recognize that the revolt was symbolic in creating subsequent Kurdish political imagination. Bozarslan's article highlights the sociological shortcomings of initial Kurdish mobilization and can be used to understand why nationalism did not emerge immediately. The development of Kurdish political consciousness through Ottoman geopolitics is also emphasized in other works, such as those by Janet Klein on the Ottoman borderlands. Klein demonstrates that militarization, border control, and imperial rivalry in the late nineteenth century created new conditions for the ethnic identification of Kurdish communities

(Klein, 2011:22–27). Though not placing particular emphasis on Sheikh Obaidullah, her work provides valuable context for understanding the role of imperial structures in shaping the development of Kurdish nationalism.

Overall, the existing literature testifies to a widespread consensus that the revolution of Sheikh Obaidullah was neither a fully nationalist movement nor a purely traditional one. Instead, it marked a transitional period in Kurdish political history and was influenced by state centralization, religious power, and socioeconomic change. Nevertheless, the majority of available research is primarily historical in character and does not directly utilize sociological theories of causality. This paper contributes to the current scholarly literature by applying the concept of causality developed by Max Weber to examine how the unintended effects of social action contributed to the formation of Kurdish nationalism.

Discussion:

One of the main aspects of this discussion is the rise and formation of Kurdish nationalistic feelings and their future development. Here, Sheikh Obaidullah Nahri emerges as both a religious leader and a national leader. He holds a place in Kurdish history not just because of his religious eminence in the Naqshbandi sect, but also because he was an early Kurdish nationalist figure (Olson, 1989). Another significant event that took place in 1880 was the organization of two Kurdish tribal chiefs' conferences by Sheikh Obaidullah, leading to the creation of a Kurdish association referred to as the Kurdish Committee or Kurdish Chiefs Association. These conferences became a turning point for Kurdish political ideas because Kurdish leaders were given an opportunity to resist external oppression and consider Kurdish independence (McDowall, 2004). The secretarial work in planning the congress was crucial, and it led to the successful gathering of about 220 tribal leaders and clerics at Shamzinan, where they deliberated on establishing a revolutionary movement (Olson, 1989).

Sheikh Obaidullah did not act in vain; the British authorities did not simply ignore the fact that Kurdish unity was increasing, but they also paid close attention to the geopolitical consequences of such a movement (Bulloch, 1992). The British Empire, which had already established a stronghold on regional power relations, began to resist the Kurdish revolution because it threatened to disrupt British interests in the Middle East (McDowall, 2004). His speeches, delivered in a manner that appealed to the masses of the Kurdish community, reflected his criticism of the Ottoman Empire and the Persian state. In one of his speeches, he passionately argued for Kurdish resistance, saying:

"The Ottomans have been coming illegally for 550 years and have deviated from the path of Islam for 400 years. Since then, the Ottoman Empire has been weak and captive to other forces. Ladies and gentlemen, it is time to listen to the advice of our ancestors and not to submit to the oppression of the Turks, who do not adhere to Islam. In fact, it is not only the Ottoman Empire that is oppressing us. Your brothers in Iran are living in a difficult economic and political situation due to a regime that has no belief in Islam." (Ali, 2010:10).

Such words are indicative of the perception of Sheikh Obaidullah that the Ottoman and the Persian government was illegitimate and corrupt, and that Kurdish people must revolt to free themselves of the oppressive government. He made the appeal grounded in action and urged the people to rebel against both the Ottoman Empire and the Persian state, which he thought would be just as destructive to the Kurdish population. A significant historic event that clarifies the nationalistic goals of Sheikh Obaidullah is the one that he wrote to the British Consul General Clayton in Bashkala and a letter to William Abbott, the British Consul General in Tehran. Robert Olson considered this letter to be one of the attempts of Sheikh Obaidullah to find foreign backing of the Kurdish cause. David McDowall (2004:53) in a modern history of Kurds confirms that the letter was dispatched to Abbott by Sheikh Obaidullah who is on the move to get in touch with foreign powers in his quest to secure Kurdish independence.

The letter contents are an indication of the independence of the Sheikh to establish Kurdish autonomy. The letter, which is given by McDowall, Olson, and John Bulloch, is as follows:

“The Kurdish nation is a nation apart. Its religion is different from that of others, also its laws and customs. The chiefs of Kurdistan, whether they be Turkish or Persian subjects, and people of Kurdistan, whether Muslim or Christian, are all united and agreed that things cannot proceed as they are with the two governments. It is imperative that the European governments should do something, once they understand the situation.... We want to take matters into our own hands. We can no longer put up with the oppression which the governments (of Persia and the Ottoman Empire) impose upon us” (McDowall, 2004:53; Olson, 1989:2; Bulloch, 1992:73).

This letter is important in a number of aspects. To begin with, it highlights the uniqueness of the Kurdish nation in the context of religious, cultural, and political identity. The fact that Sheikh Obaidullah stated that Kurds were a separate and distinct nation supports his idea of Kurdish unity across sectarian and tribal lines. Furthermore, the letter indicates that the Sheikh was frustrated with the Ottoman and Persian administrations, thus placing the Kurdish people in a position of being oppressed by two foreign powers. The manifestation of European powers’ appeal indicates that Kurdish nationalism had an international dimension, and the Sheikh realized that he could not establish Kurdish independence without receiving the support of foreign agents. This letter, along with the discourse and organizational activities of Sheikh Obaidullah, provides valuable information about the initiation of Kurdish nationalism. It shows how the Sheikh was not only focused on both religious and political leadership but also understood that he needed to engage wider international actors in order to achieve Kurdish self-determination.

Ultimately, the initiatives by Sheikh Obaidullah Nahri in 1880—such as the establishment of the Kurdish Committee, his revolutionary speech, and his dealings with British leaders—signaled the development of Kurdish nationalism. Although his revolution was ultimately crushed, these events helped take an important step toward the development of Kurdish political ideas and activities, which preconditioned further movements in support of Kurdish independence and nationality. The actions of the Sheikh highlight the complex relationship between religious, political, and nationalist forces, which would become one of the most influential in Kurdish history.

To many researchers, the letter written by Sheikh Obaidullah Nahri is seen as an important initial sign of the early development of Kurdish nationalism. Nonetheless, even today, some scholars believe that there is no conclusive evidence to fully support this claim. For example, McDowall (2004) recognizes Sheikh Obaidullah as the first significant Kurdish nationalist but argues that there is a lack of historical documentation that can conclusively prove this. Interestingly, although the nationalist aspect of Sheikh Obaidullah’s movement was somewhat weak, it is historically significant as the first major effort to introduce the Kurdish national idea in an organized manner (Tani, 2006). Robert Olson also emphasizes the nationalist character of Sheikh Obaidullah’s leadership. He asserts that the Sheikh’s leadership was quite nationalistic, unlike the secular leadership of Mir Badr Khan, who, although an emir, did not pursue any nationalistic interests. Unlike Mir Badr Khan, Sheikh Obaidullah’s religious authority and influence enabled him to incorporate religious symbolic language into his nationalist agenda, which a secular leader like Badr Khan could not achieve despite his position as a leader (Olson, 1989:1–2). Moreover, Sheikh Obaidullah clearly expressed the ambition of an independent Kurdistan, signaling that it was time for political independence and nationhood.

Juwayda also explains the emergence of the sheikhs as national leaders by noting the power vacuum created by the disappearance and weakening of the strong Kurdish emirs in the region, coupled with the religious prestige the sheikhs enjoyed. In the absence of a secular leader to occupy this vacuum, the Kurdish people turned to the sheikhs and willingly accepted them as leaders. According to Juwayda, this is

described as a psychological vacuum in Kurdish nationalist ideas, where an influential national leader had been lacking prior to 1847; as a result, the ideals of tribal daring had become alien and unnatural to the Kurds. There was also no centralized national identity or leader, which made the process of Kurdish nationalism even more difficult (Juwayda, 2008:170).

The delayed or weakened Kurdish nationalism arose due to several factors. One major cause was the constant subjugation and intrusion by other powers, especially the Arabs, Turks, and Persians, who ruled Kurdish lands for centuries. These forces continually obstructed Kurdish political independence, often justifying their rule through religion. The emergence of the Islamic state, and the integration of most Kurds into it—either by conquest or conversion—further complicated the formation of a distinct Kurdish identity. This meant that political and national identity was frequently subordinated to religious identity, postponing the establishment of Kurdish national consciousness. Additionally, the general Islamic spirit and the Arab-centered worldview promoted by Islamic rulers reinforced the perception of Arab dominance, actively opposing nationalist ideologies that could challenge it. This was one of the greatest obstacles to the development of Kurdish nationalism, as the Islamic state discouraged national ideas that could threaten the unity of the Muslim Ummah (Botani, 2006).

Acknowledging the leadership of Kurdish sheikhs, Juwayda (2008:170) identifies religious esteem as not the only reason for their prominence. He states that this role was also a direct result of the political vacuum created by the decline of the great Kurdish emirates that previously controlled the region. With no secular leader to occupy this power vacuum, the sheikhs—especially those of the religious and traditional aristocracy—were promoted as the natural leaders. Consequently, the Kurds, in dire need of strong leadership, turned to the sheikhs, granting them the national leadership role. The sheikhs' religious influence, coupled with the absence of a secular alternative, created unity among Kurdish society, and their spiritual authority gave them significant power in determining the community's direction. Using Weber's concept of bureaucracy to interpret how the Ottoman and Qajar systems affected political processes and shaped resistance opportunities and nationalism, these state formations may have created barriers to the Kurdish national movement by centralizing authority and concentrating control.

Juwayda further describes this dynamic as a psychological emptiness in Kurdish nationalist thought, particularly before 1847. The absence of an influential Kurdish political, military, or ideological leader indicated that the Kurds lacked a central figure to unify them. Consequently, the key principles of Kurdish social and political organization—tribal courage, honor, and leadership—appeared somewhat out of touch with the changing geopolitical environment. The traditional Kurdish political structure, founded on tribalism and regional autonomy, was compromised by these changes, placing the Kurdish people in a state of political disorientation. The tribal leadership model, previously inherent to Kurdish society, could no longer address issues posed by foreign domination and internal fragmentation. This increased the desire for a unified nation and a powerful political leader, making many Kurds look to the sheikhs as an alternative power structure.

The delayed emergence of Kurdish nationalism can be explained by several historical, political, and social factors. First, the political domination of outside forces—the Arabs, Turks, and Persians—greatly inhibited the formation of an independent Kurdish national identity. Historically, these powers took pride in controlling Kurdish lands and people, either through military conquest or diplomatic treaties, often under the guise of religion. Their cultural and linguistic dominance meant that the Kurds were constantly governed by outside empires, weakening their demands for independence or self-rule. The rise of the Islamic state, especially during the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates, further complicated the situation. Most Kurds, along with other ethnic populations in the Middle East, were incorporated into the Islamic world, both politically and religiously, through conversion or integration. This integration often overrode

ethnic or national loyalties. The influence of religion and politics under Arab rulers played a key role in delaying the formation of Kurdish nationalism. The idea of a separate Kurdish nation-state was difficult to imagine within the larger Islamic Empire, where religious unity and devotion to the caliphate tended to take precedence over ethnic distinctions.

Additionally, the hegemony of Islamic thought, particularly the notion of Arab racial superiority, further impeded Kurdish nationalism. According to Botani (2006), the Arab-centered worldview promoted by Islamic teachings and rulers relegated non-Arab groups, such as the Kurds, to a subordinate position. This perception of racial and cultural superiority discouraged the development of nationalist ideas among most of the Muslim world. The concept of nationalism—the idea that people of the same ethnicity, language, and culture could establish their own nation-state—was both politically repressed and religiously disapproved. Nationalism, as understood within the Islamic ideal, was seen as contrary to the unity of the Muslim Ummah. This rejection of ethnic nationalism, combined with the primacy of religious identity, made it difficult for the Kurds to pursue national goals in a meaningful way.

Furthermore, the spirit of Islam during this period, emphasizing religious unification and obedience to the caliph, dominated the Kurdish psyche, often overriding ethnic or political concerns. The Arabization of Kurdish populations under Islamic rule further constrained expressions of Kurdish nationalism, which were often seen as divisive or un-Islamic. The absence of a unifying political leader capable of transcending local tribal boundaries further reinforced this limitation. The sheikhs, including that of Sheikh Obaidullah, became the center of Kurdish political expression, yet even they operated within the constraints of Islamic orthodoxy and Arab and Ottoman supremacy.

In summary, Kurdish nationalism took a long time to emerge, as historical, political, and religious factors interacted in complex ways to delay its development. The rule of foreign powers, the spread of Islam, and the ideological rejection of nationalism all suppressed Kurdish national consciousness. Only after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the decline of the Kurdish emirates did a new form of Kurdish leadership, embodied by figures such as Sheikh Obaidullah, emerge. Nevertheless, this leadership relied heavily on religious and traditional organizations, which also contributed to the continued postponement of fully realizing Kurdish nationalistic ambitions.

Conclusion:

The authority of the Ottoman and Qajar empires shaped the socio-political environment of the Kurdish people in the middle of the nineteenth century. Traditionally, Kurdish lands were under the rule of regional powers primarily the Ottomans and had experienced a political vacuum. This emptiness was exacerbated by the continuous Ottoman-Russian struggles and the persistent hostilities between the Ottoman and Qajar nations, which made the Kurdish people both instruments and primary casualties of these wars. The repressive policies of the Ottoman administration, aimed at centralizing the country, further worsened the plight of the Kurds.

In response, the Kurdish sheikhs particularly those of the Naqshbandi Sufi order attempted to fill the political vacuum left by the decline of the Kurdish emirates. These sheikhs leveraged their spiritual authority to assume leadership positions at various points. Sheikh Obaidullah Nahri's resistance to Qajar rule represents one of the most significant modern Kurdish efforts to redress these injustices. Although his revolution did not achieve the long-term aspirations of the Kurdish people, the campaign still marked a crucial political and social event.

The sociological and historiographical analysis of the circumstances that enabled the rise of Sheikh Obaidullah as an ethno-religious leader is essential for understanding the complex interplay between ethnic identity, religious influence, and political authority during this period.

To trace the development of Kurdish nationalism, it is necessary to examine the socio-political processes and causal interactions that shaped the events surrounding Sheikh Obaidullah's actions. By writing to the British Consul and convening conferences of Kurdish tribal leaders, Sheikh Obaidullah explicitly called for the creation of a Kurdish nation. Most historians consider these actions to be the first tangible demonstration of Kurdish nationalism and a major shift in Kurdish political consciousness. For the first time, a religious figure with strong traditional and spiritual influence expressed Kurdish demands for political independence to the Ottoman, Qajar, and European powers.

However, some scholars such as Kurdologists and orientalist historians remain unconvinced that these activities alone prove the existence of Kurdish nationalism. Although they acknowledge Sheikh Obaidullah's efforts as the early stages of a nationalist movement, they argue that the evidence does not support the claim that his actions were a fully developed manifestation of nationalism. Instead, they consider his efforts a significant precursor to later nationalist movements rather than a definitive indication of them.

In summary, although Sheikh Obaidullah's political and social activism did not lead to the full realization of Kurdish national goals, it represented the most important step toward establishing the initial experience of Kurdish nationalism. His work, together with the historical context, provides valuable insights not only into the complex dynamics of social and political transformation in Kurdish society but also into broader processes of social and political change. To fully understand the significance of these developments, it is crucial to continue examining the multidimensional influences on Kurdish nationalism and to consider the challenges of interpreting historical evidence within its socio-political context.

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