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Peace at Home, a Minor Intervention Abroad? Explaining the Turkish-Iranian Border Revision of 1932

Abstract

Although historians of Turkish foreign policy have emphasized Turkey's pro-status-quo stance during the interwar period, the international and regional political context of the time sometimes offered states the opportunity to make revisions to the existing order. Cross-border rebellions represented one such opportunity. Turkey was among the countries which saw border amendments as an option, despite a nation-state discourse and ideology emphasizing the 'inviolability' of the existing borders. This article shows how Turkey, unable to suppress the cross-border Ararat Rebellion in the late 1920s and early 1930s, opted for a military operation on Iranian soil and successfully demanded a revision to its supposedly well-established 'Qasr-e Shirin borders.' The article identifies three major factors that conditioned Turkey's exceptional approach to its Iranian border in the 1930s: the historical factor of Ottoman-Iranian relations, the new territoriality of nation-states, and the Soviet Union's influence on the region. It critically employs the memoirs of key Turkish political elites active in the resolution of this dispute, Turkish newspapers, and archival documents. It contributes to our understanding of early republican Turkish notions of territoriality while building on recent scholarship which questions the assumption of early republican Turkey's strict non-revisionism and disinterest in the Middle East.

Keywords: Turkish foreign policy, Ararat Rebellion, Turkish-Iranian relations, borders, interwar period

1. Introduction

Scholars have traditionally argued not only that the foreign-policy and domestic-policy spheres of early republican Turkey were distinct, but that the republican government's main priorities in foreign policy were to be seen as a European state within the international state system and, above all, to preserve the territorial status quo. Having achieved what it could at Lausanne – so the general narrative goes – Turkey took advantage of relative stability among its neighbors to postpone or discard any desire for further border changes, instead directing its attention toward internal affairs.[1] As if to reinforce this policy priority, the 1931 speech in which Turkish President Mustafa Kemal [Atatürk] uttered his famous dictum on non-interventionism, 'peace at home,

1 For this widely held general assessment of early republican foreign policy, see, among many others: Ahmad 2002; Armaoğlu 1992; Davison 1968, 141–2; Hale 2013 [2000]; Kushner 1984, 233–4; Oran 2019, 46.

peace in the world,' was (aside from a few words about trade) entirely about domestic policy.

It is understandable why internal affairs were the priority of the new Turkish government. An active, if not revisionist, foreign policy could have provoked backlash from the Soviet Union, Turkey's strongest neighbor and frequent supporter during the 1920s. Moreover, Ankara faced its most serious challenges at home. Because of the rapid transformation of political, social, and cultural fields, resentment spread among a variety of groups which from time to time erupted in popular mobilizations and direct clashes with state authority. The Menemen Incident of 1930 and, before that, the Sheikh Said Revolt of 1925 are the most known examples of these.[2] Although the nationalist and religious-based causes for the Sheikh Said Revolt and different motivations held by the leadership cadre and the masses in this incident have been a point of dispute, the revolt highlighted the dissatisfaction spreading among the country's Kurdish population in particular. The primary source of discontent was the state's drive to penetrate Kurdish-majority areas with the reforms while giving state officials full control over the area where Kurdish leadership had enjoyed some kind of autonomy. Kurds' hope to maintain this autonomy (if not achieve full independence) can be seen as major stimulus for a number of rebellions that occurred in the early-republican era, and which occupied Ankara and the republic's internal security forces.

Kurdish rebellions, which took place in border regions and whose leadership demanded a change in the form of governance in the border regions of the new republic, thus blurred the line between foreign and domestic policies and forced Ankara to take aggressive action abroad even at a time when, historians claim, 'foreign relations took a back seat.'[3] Over time, these rebellions began to take place after newly formed states had had a chance to expand their institutional capacities and could actively test new, revisionist directions in foreign policy. This article uses the example of the Ararat Rebellion, a flare-up of Kurdish opposition near the Turkish-Iranian border, to qualify the assumptions that historians have made about Turkish foreign policy in the interwar period. The Ararat Rebellion, and the Turkish-Iranian border more broadly, thus serve as critical case studies for the foreign policy and territorial vision of the early Turkish Republic. In 1928, as rebellion was underway, Tevfik Rüştü [Aras], the Turkish foreign minister, argued that the nature of Turkey's border with Iran had changed in the preceding years. Once an insignificant dotted line in a greater Muslim World, he told the American ambassador to Turkey at the time, it had now become a civilizational divider. 'The frontier of the Near East has changed,' he said. 'It no longer embraces Persia. The Near East includes the Balkans and Turkey and its frontier is the eastern frontier of Turkey. … Turkey is now a western power….'[4] Disruptions simultaneously underway along that frontier, however, belied Tevfik Rüştü's all-too clear mental map.

2 For more information on these uprisings, and on the uprisings of this period in general, see: Azak 2007; Jwaideh 2009, 203–18; McDowall 2005, 184–213; Olson 1989, 1991, 2000; Tejel Gorgas 2009; Zürcher 2000.

3 Hale 2013, 54.

4 Grew 1952, 753.

The Ararat Rebellion took place across three different waves from 1926 to 1930 and was led primarily by former rebels from the Sheikh Said Revolt who had taken shelter on and around Mount Ararat (*Ağrı Dağı)*. Turkey's eastern provinces had continuously witnessed local and small-scale armed confrontations between the army and Kurdish groups after 1925, the suppression of the Sheikh Said Revolt.[5] Thus, the initial rebellious actions around Mount Ararat can be considered within the context of these irregular activities. The situation became more complicated when the Kurdish elites who had taken refuge in countries like Syria, Iran, and Lebanon during and after the Sheikh Said Revolt established the Khoybun Organization in 1927 with the intention of unifying all Kurdish nationalist organizations created until that time.[6] Khoybun's direct involvement in the Ararat Rebellion – appointing both military and civilian leaders such as İhsan Nuri and İbrahim Pasha to the region and encouraging Kurds from other regions to join – invigorated the nationalistic sentiments of the Ararat Rebellion.[7] Ankara first tried to suppress the rebellion by passing an amnesty law and suspending the implementation of Kurdish population relocations; and then, directly negotiating with the leaders of the rebellion.[8] After the negotiations did not yield notable results, the government opted for an all-out military solution to fight against these factions and put an end to the waves of rebellion in the region.

Rather than to engage with the Turkish armed forces, however, one of the main tactics used by rebel groups was to evade confrontation and cross the Turkish-Iranian border. Initially, the Turkish army was not authorized to engage in hot pursuit against the rebellious groups across the Iranian border. Thus, the transborder and mobility elements of the Ararat Rebellion entailed both foreign and domestic-policy implications: It generated tensions between Turkish and Iranian governments, made the region unsafe for commercial activities and transportation, and most importantly, it prevented Ankara from reaching the region with its centralizing reforms. It was a direct challenge to the newly founded state's attempt to establish its incontestable authority in the region. After Tehran continued to deny Turkish government requests for permission to engage in hot pursuit on Iranian territory, in 1930, Ankara initiated a unilateral operation in which it entered Iranian soil without permission, surrounded the rebels at the Lesser Ararat (*Küçük Ağrı),* and suppressed the rebellion for good.[9] It used the presence of Turkish troops on Iranian territory (along with Soviet pressure on Iran) to demand a border revision, which it successfully imposed against Iranian wishes after long negotiations in 1932.

The *fait accompli* imposed by the Turkish government against Iran, along with its military, security, and diplomatic mobilization, seems to contradict the commonly held idea regarding the Turkish pro-status-quo tendency in foreign affairs. Why did Turkey, then, opt for unilateral military action and border revision in this case? An

5 Jwaideh 2009, 418.
6 Jwaideh 2009, 419; Tejel 2009, 17–20; Tejel 2021.
7 Alakom 1998, 15.
8 Jwaideh 2009, 420–1.
9 Akdevelioğlu and Kürkçüoğlu 2019, 362.

examination of this question helps us better understand early republican Turkey and its relationship to territoriality, sovereignty, authority, state capacity and border revisions. Indeed, while most historians have generally defined the nature of early republican foreign policy as non-revisionist, some scholars have recently started to express some reservations about both this pro-status quo tendency more broadly and about Turkish disinterest towards the Middle East in particular. While accepting the weight of domestic issues in Turkish politics in the 1920s and 1930s, Amit Bein, for example, presents the perceptions held by many actors in the region of Turkish willingness, given the chance, for border revisions with Iran, Iraq and Syria, especially in the 1930s.[10] Bein also asserts that the Turkish defense of the post-World War I order and its policy of self-detachment from the Middle East only emerged with World War II, with the Balkans and Iran under occupation.[11] Among others, such perspectives invite researchers to re-evaluate the Turkish attitude towards its post-1918 border within the political context of the period itself.

The Ararat Rebellions, a cross-border problem for the early republic, forced the Turkish government to address both spheres simultaneously. In the literature, the rebellions have been discussed in various ways. Historians have highlighted its novel nationalistic character (unlike previous revolts, it drew in Kurds from other countries) and its relative longevity (thanks to the difficult geography of the region).[12] Although some have seen the rebellion 'as the direct continuation of Shaikh Said's Revolt,'[13] the Ararat Rebellion has also been characterized as 'the most purely nationalist' by Kurdish nationalists[14] when compared to other contemporary rebellions like Sheikh Said (1925) and Dersim (1937–1938). Some scholars of Kurdish nationalism, meanwhile, have evaluated 1930, the year of suppression of the Ararat Rebellion, as the ending date of a first phase of Kurdish nationalism.[15] The Ararat Rebellion is portrayed as one of the rare occasions in which problems among Kurds have been set aside for a common cause.[16] At the same time, the literature has highlighted the close cooperation between the Khoybun organization and the Armenian nationalist network during the rebellion, the by-product of a 'shared experience of exile and existence of a common enemy.'[17]

With regard to the outcome of the Ararat Rebellion, meanwhile, scholars have shown how the rebellion served as a constitutive element for both Turkish state and Kurds. The suppression of the rebellion paved a way for Kurdish nationalists residing in Syria and Lebanon not to give up their ideas for good, but to pursue their cause in intellectual and cultural fields, a development that has come to be known as the

10 Bein 2017, 25.
11 *idem*, 216.
12 Olson 1991, 402.
13 Van Bruinessen 1992a, 265.
14 Benson-Sokmen 2019, 29.
15 Van Bruinessen 1992b, 28.
16 Tezcür 2019, 3.
17 Tejel 2021, 361.

'Kurdish Cultural Renaissance.'[18] Turkish state officials, meanwhile, responded to the rebellion by drafting a settlement law in 1932 (even though it did not pass until 1934, under very different circumstances).[19] Moreover, the novel use of the air force by the Turkish military, something not present during the Sheikh Said Rebellion, was accompanied by a heightened nationalistic rhetoric and ideology of the Turkish state, while the other side felt exhaustion and 'collective destruction,' something apparent in number of rebellions that occurred afterwards.[20] A final constitutive element discussed in the literature is the cooperation of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey on the topic of Kurdish uprisings. The Turkish-Iranian border revision of 1932 and the Treaty of Saadabad of 1937 are outcomes of this cooperation.[21]

This article does not profess to provide a comprehensive study on the Ararat Rebellions in the eyes of every single international and local actor, an endeavor which would demand more linguistic expertise or extensive scholarly collaboration.[22] Rather, the humbler aim of this article is to use the case study of the Ararat Rebellions to reassess the taken-for-granted ideas regarding early Republican foreign policy. It shows that the Turkish state, perceiving the rebellion as an existential problem, responded with a revisionist and unilateral approach, one that it did not prefer in those years.[23] It identifies three major factors that conditioned Turkey's exceptional approach to its Iranian border in the 1930s: the historical factor of Ottoman-Iranian relations, the new territoriality of nation-states, and the Soviet Union's influence on the region. The following sections take up each of these factors in turn. To this end, this article critically employs the memoirs of key Turkish political elites active in the resolution of this dispute alongside Turkish newspapers and archival documents from the Republican Archives. These sources help us to investigate how the early republican Turkish state viewed issues of sovereignty and territoriality while engaging with an active cross-border rebellion.

18 Aktürk 2016, 48; Tejel 2009, 21–7.
19 Dündar 2014, 16; Öztan 2020, 85; Ülker 2008.
20 Olson 2000, 66 and 89.
21 On these developments, see: Çetinsaya 1999; Tezcür 2019, 6.
22 For the central Persian-language work, see: Bayāt 1374 [1995]. The author thanks an anonymous reviewer for several helpful suggestions made in this regard. For Armenian-language works shedding light on the rebellions, see: Moumdjian 2018, 187 fn. 11.
23 This article thus makes sense of the Turkish government's response differently than Vahram Ter-Matevosyan (2019, 212–3), who briefly considers the 1930s border revision with Iran in the context of a latent irredentist trend in interwar Turkish foreign policy. It also qualifies Garabet K. Moumdjian's assertion (2018, 192) that the 'main reason' for the solution of the Ararat Rebellions was the intervention of the Soviet Union. While Soviet intervention did *enable* Turkey to insist on border revisions, this article shows, this was simply one major factor among several.

2. A New Chapter in a Long Story: The Historical Factor

The Turkish-Iranian borderlands are historic areas of contention, owing to hostile relations between the empires of each side, consequent wars, religious and socio-political uprisings, and smuggling. As such, they resembled many other border areas of early modernity. Lengthy Ottoman-Safavid wars ended with a series of prominent treaties, including the Treaty of Amasya (1555), the Nasuh Pasha Treaty (1612), and the famous (especially in Turkey) Qasr-e Shirin Treaty (or Treaty of Zohab), signed in 1639. A common assumption shared by many in Turkey – that the Qasr-e Shirin/Zohab Treaty drew the current Turkish-Iranian borders and ended all hostilities between the Ottomans and Iran – needs to be corrected. Revising this assumption does not necessarily mean underestimating or totally ignoring the historical importance of the Qasr-e Shirin/Zohab Treaty, however. Indeed, the treaty established a more or less common understanding between its parties. As late as nineteenth-century conferences, both the Ottomans and the Qajars made territorial claims on the basis of this treaty to convince the other side on their own claims' legitimacy.[24] Nonetheless, the image of the treaty as an unchanged and time-frozen entity does not reflect its historical reality. First, this image ignores all eighteenth and nineteenth-century wars, conflicts and compromises that took place between the two countries. As Sabri Ateş clearly shows, the treaty was 'only a step in the evolution of a boundary that took almost 400 years to reach maturity.'[25] The treaty did not bring a fixed line, and the allegiances of tribes settling throughout the borderland continued to be the decisive factor on indicating which empire owned which territory.[26] Second, this cliché invokes, at least, implicitly, the idea that the current understanding of borders was relevant for statesmen in the seventeenth century as well. Finally, the narrative does not allow us to reflect on the regime and ideology changes that occurred in both countries, especially in the first half of the twentieth century. Ottoman-Iranian and Turkish-Iranian relations have not been monolithic entities frozen in time; rather, they have changed together with the common borders of the countries, their mutual perceptions, and their level of cooperation. The second half of the 1920s and the subsequent decade present a very vivid example of this.

During the 1920s, both countries witnessed regime changes. The pace and the degree of success of the state-building and nation-building reforms of each country are subject to discussion. There was, of course, a great deal of difference between Turkey and Iran, their societies, the historical baggage they carried, and their institutional capacities. Turkish republican elite got a head-start on the reform process thanks to earlier Ottoman achievements in modernization, especially with respect to 'the creation of a national standing army of conscripts, a national monetary system, a nationwide communication network of railways and telegraph lines, a large and self-confident bureaucracy, and a secular judicial system.'[27] Nevertheless, one of the

24 Ateş 2013, 96.
25 Ateş 2019, 398.
26 *ibid*.
27 Atabaki and Zürcher 2004, 9–10.

significant commonalities shared by newly-founded republican Turkey and Pahlavi Iran was the uprisings both regimes faced. The reason for this commonality can be found in the similar nature of reforms in both countries. Both took the path of top-down 'authoritarian modernization;' both regimes saw earlier efforts at modernization turn out unsuccessfully; both aimed at establishing cultural and ethnic unity; and both proclaimed an appreciation for 'secularism, Westernism and meritocratism.'[28]

While Turkey struggled to suppress the Sheikh Said and the Ararat Rebellions in the 1920s, Iran was also trying to settle the situation on the other side of the border. Iran's problems on the 'other side' were also followed closely by Ankara. The Sheikh Khazal Rebellion, which took place on the country's Gulf coast between 1922–1924, for instance, was one of these rebellions. In essence, this rebellion was a reaction to Reza Shah's policy of extending centralist rule and achieving full control over the land and populations hitherto controlled by local rulers.[29] Documents from the Turkish archives indicate that the government noted Iran's suppression of the Sheikh Khazal rebellion in 1924; it also observed, however, that his sons had now also turned into rebels and that Iran had dispatched military units away from Tabriz to fight against these rebels.[30] Moreover, some aspects of these uprisings and social discontent became cross-border issues when rebellious factions crossed the border to prevent armies from following in hot pursuit.

This continued to be the case throughout the Ararat Rebellion of 1926–1930. The cross-border implications of the rebellions went as far as having the potential to stymie each country's efforts to build friendly relations or to trigger military action against each other. The gravity of the situation is indicated by the instructions given in 1930 by Prime Minister İsmet [İnönü] to Hüsrev [Gerede], newly appointed as Turkish ambassador to Tehran:

> Hüsrev, your situation is like the ambassadors of the states bringing their fleets in front of the Dardanelles Strait and sending their embassy staff to the Sublime Porte in order to dictate their will during decline period of the Ottoman Empire. There is only one distinction [between their situation and yours]. Our state sends you to prevent a violation of public security and the creation of a *Macedonia* on its borders, which is a legitimate right and [source of] determination. Accordingly, you will negotiate with the Iranian government while a mobilized army is ready to act [if negotiations fail]. You have to act upon requirements of this serious situation.[31]

It is apparent that Turkey, a supposedly 'pro-status quo' country at the time, was prepared to go as far as military confrontation with Iran if things did not go well in diplomacy. Remarkably, İsmet, the prime minister, was known for his restraint and

28 *ibid*., 5–7.
29 Cronin 2010, 51.
30 Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı Devlet Arşivleri (Cumhuriyet Arşivi) (hereafter: BCA). 30.10.0.0 / 112.758.1, 12.06.1928.
31 Gerede 1952, 20.

moderation when compared with Mustafa Kemal, Turkey's president at the time.[32] Nonetheless, the context in the late 1920s inspired İsmet to 'boldness' even as Mustafa Kemal spoke of his confidence in his 'Iranian brothers' and Reza Shah himself to settle their problems in a peaceful way by realizing 'the meaningless nature of the conflicts of the past.'[33]

3. The Context Unfolded: The Territorial Factor

The changing context of the borderland in the late 1920s and 1930s inspired not only a renewed discursive 'boldness,' but also an appeal to border revisions. This new context, however, also rested on a deeper mutual distrust between Turkey and Iran that was based both on historical rivalry and on each new regime's sensitivities towards their stability and territorial integrity. Aside from the older legacy of confrontations and warfare due to conflicting territorial claims and sectarian divisions, more recent Ottoman interventions on Iranian territory – Abdülhamit II's attempt to integrate Iran's Sunni Kurdish population into his empire from 1905, or the Committee of Union and Progress government's incursions during World War I – created a basis for distrust. Such issues were not, of course, simply forgotten by new regimes. In fact, they were exacerbated by the nation-state mentality and by cross-border rumors.[34] The seeds of rumors fell on fertile ground. Memduh Şevket [Esendal], Turkey's ambassador to Iran from 1925 to 1930, recounted that Reza Shah relayed to him the opinion of the British ambassador that Turks aimed to create an independent Kurdistan and envisioned Iranian Kurdistan to be a part of this state.[35] Actually, the formation of an independent Kurdish state backed by a foreign power was a source of anxiety shared by both Turkish and Iranian ruling elite at that time. Turkey was also concerned about spread of Kurdish nationalist ideas from an independent Kurdish state which could be created around Mosul with British support.[36]

Apart from this, Iran was suspicious of Turkey's vision of Iranian Azerbaijan. The suspicion regarding this area can be related to Iranian skepticism toward the new Turkish state's affiliation with pan-Turkism, which, Iran believed, it might have inherited from the Young Turks. In his memoirs, Memduh Şevket tried to make it clear that 'Turkey had no plan to invade Iranian Azerbaijan, and I am here to establish a bond with the two nations' on the occasion of a meeting with high-level Iranian officials.[37] When it came to Turkish concerns, meanwhile, these were about Iran's relations with the Kurds in Turkey and rebellious factions in general. Turkey had not been happy with the way in which Iran dealt with the rebels of the Ararat and other Kurdish tribes

32 Aydemir 1968, 6.
33 Gerede 1952, 16.
34 cf. Öztan 2021, 56.
35 Esendal 1999, 88.
36 Atatürk 1999, 95.
37 Esendal 1999, 20.

near the Turkish border. Memduh Şevket's successor Hüsrev similarly accused Iran of turning a blind eye as rebels supplied food and ammunition from Iranian side, in his words 'explicitly supporting this offense.'[38] The Iranian government, meanwhile, seemed to remain detached from the chaos, not clashing with Kurdish rebels who crossed the border to the Iranian side to get equipment and supplies. Some scholars have assessed this non-intervention as a choice motivated by the Shah's intention of taking advantage of the situation while territorial negotiations with Turkey were being carried out.[39] While rebellious factions hoped for a continuation of Iran's policy of not cooperating with Turkey, Tehran's neutrality ended following increasing Turkish and Soviet threats that culminated with the Turkish incursion onto Iranian soil.[40]

Iranian accounts differ. Hassan Arfa, an Iranian colonel very close to Reza Shah at the time, states that, after Turkish protests to Iran during the Ararat Rebellions, Iran actively sent military units near Turkish border to fight against rebels from Jelali tribe in north of Maku; the leader of the military unit was himself killed in the clash. His is a story of Turkish intransigence in the face of Iranian compliance.[41] This account seems incompatible with the image of Iran seen in Turkey at the time. Even after the suppression of the Ararat Rebellion in the autumn of 1930, Turkish dissatisfaction can be followed through state documents. In a briefing sent to the Ministry of the Interior by Ibrahim Tali [Öngören], who was serving as the inspector general in the area, argued that Iran made a peace with rebels without taking their guns, provoked them to create gangs and loot villages on the Turkish side.[42] This document is from 1931, that is, the year when diplomatic negotiations between Turkey and Iran were continuing in a very intense way. If the report's claims are valid, one can speculate that Iran intended to drive Turkey into a corner with the threat of a new uprising or just to leave Turkey in a tight spot in the field while negotiations were still underway. If one believes that the report may have exaggerated the reality to some extent, the reason for such an exaggeration may be related with Turkish intention to provide legitimacy to its general position in the ongoing diplomatic negotiations with Iran.

Compounded by the lack of sufficient physical demarcation all along the border,[43] the situation was overall prone to ambiguities, distrust, and further problems. Clearly, the Turkish-Iranian Security and Friendship Agreement, which was signed in 1926 and emphasized joint action on border security so that neither side would become a safe haven for rebellious factions targeting the other side, had also fallen short of expectations.[44] With ongoing waves of rebellion and insecurity in its borderlands, Turkey became harsher in its methods of resolving the issue. At the same time it sent a new and hawkish ambassador to Iran for a diplomatic solution, it also mobilized its

38 Gerede 1952, 19.
39 Olson 1998, 23.
40 Strohmeier 2003, 98.
41 Arfa 1966, 40.
42 BCA 30-10-0-0 / 112-761-3, 06.10.1931.
43 Akdevelioğlu and Kürkçüoğlu 2019, 360.
44 As 2010, 237.

army. When one looks at the statements from Iranian and Turkish political elites, it becomes clearer that the essential source of discontent was anxiety surrounding territorial integrity. States has sought to achieve total authority within their borders by eliminating sources of insecurity. While the aim of creating authority in a more or less certain territory with minimum or none inner challenges might also be ascribed to state mechanisms of earlier periods, a change in mentality set into motion through the formation of nation-states and the rise of modern territoriality.

Another visible example of this changing mentality was nation-states' refusal to rely on any fighting force other than their own conscription armies to secure their territory and wage wars.[45] Early republican Turkey was no exception. In his memoirs, İsmet argues that:

> To eliminate a rebellious faction, aligning with another rebel was a tradition in administration for centuries. We do not take this route in the republic. … The State, with some reasons and conditions, proclaims amnesty in particular cases. However, it cannot be acceptable for the state authority to enter into an agreement or arrangement with the rebel.[46]

The prime minister's reasoning makes it clear that the newly founded republic aimed for full control over its internationally recognized territories without relying on the power of any other group, faction, or formation that may have contested state authority. This was without a doubt a departure from imperial ways of governing. As late as the late nineteenth century, for example, the Shammar tribes and the Ottoman administration had cooperated to fight against other rebellious groups and other states, even as the Shammar themselves could have turned into rebels from time to time.[47]

Apart from its purely political aspect, there was also an economic side to the territoriality of absolute state control. The nation-state seeks to integrate all submarkets under its domain and connect them to the greater domestic market; in this way, all transactions become knowable and legal, which means 'taxable.' The series of rebellions and the insecure environment along the Turkish-Iranian border also meant economic losses both for the local and national economy. Sheep rustling was the threat to the local economy most frequently noted in state documents. For instance, in December of 1928, it was reported that sheep had been stolen from the villages of Şerefhane and Karahisar.[48] Likewise, in the summer of 1929, rebellious factions coming from the Iranian side opened fire on a military guard post and abducted approximately three hundred sheep before returning to Iran.[49]

As for the negative impact of this situation into the greater national economy, it seems that one of the greatest issues was the Turkish policy of revitalizing the his-

45 Ruggie 1993, 163.
46 İnönü 2018, 533.
47 Dolbee 2022, 138.
48 BCA. 30-10-0-0 / 105-683-20, 03.12.1928.
49 BCA. 30-10-0-0 / 128-915-43, 20.08.1929.

toric Tabriz-Trebizond route. This route, which had lost popularity for several reasons, including the Russian-built Jolfa-Batumi railway and World War I, continued to be severely damaged in the late 1920s by non-stop raids of rebels and extreme Turkish suspicion about smuggling.[50] All these must have brought decrease in tax revenues and trade volumes, which created disadvantages both for local and national economies of Iranian and Turkish sides. It was in this context, consecutive rebellions enflamed by border-crossing tactics, the nation-state's threat perception, and the need felt to control territory maximally in both political and economic terms led Turkish officials to a more 'radical' solution package: A *fait accompli* in the region that was intended to result in a border revision.

Prime Minister İsmet insisted that there was no way to suppress the Ararat Rebellions for good other than to continue military operations across the Iranian border in 1930, since the division of the Mount Ararat between Iranian and Turkish territory was beneficial for rebels who used difficult-to-access borders to escape hot pursuit.[51] As noted above, the rebels' strategy was successful because Ankara's request for permission to follow rebels in hot pursuit across the border had been denied by Tehran. After the rebellion's third wave, however, Turkish forces entered Iranian soil to eliminate the rebels themselves. With Turkish soldiers mobilized on Iranian territory, the Turkish government demonstrated its willingness to annex all of Mount Ararat including the Lesser Ararat, whose eastern slopes were then located on Iranian soil. At that point, territorial negotiations were launched between two countries. When these negotiations finalized on 23 January 1932 in Tehran with an agreement, Turkey annexed the territory it asked for in exchange for ceding some territories near Khotur and Barjegeh to Iran.[52] Choosing what territory to give in exchange must not have been a random choice in this case because the status of Khotur, in particular, had been a source of a protracted conflict between the Ottomans and the Qajars from 1820s onwards.[53]

These negotiations entail several important consequences for our understanding of nation-state territoriality in Turkey in the 1930s. First, it is remarkable that nation-state territory could be put up for negotiation at all. What about the National Struggle [*Millî Mücadele*] and the National Pact [*Misak-ı Millî*], which had set the goal of an inseparable homeland for Turkey's nationalists? Scholars of border studies have already made clear that borders are not simply lines drawn in a timeless and agentless manner. These 'lines' generate inclusions, exclusions and hierarchies not only between states, but also between people in political, economic, social and cultural fields.[54] Borders remain 'under construction' by a variety of different actors seeking to make gains and achieve higher levels of 'power and sovereignty through different means at

50 Bein 2017, 114.
51 İnönü 2018, 526–7.
52 Bournoutian 2015, 103.
53 Ateş 2013, 147.
54 Newman 2003, 123.

various levels – global, regional, national and local.'[55] Even the 'inviolable borders' of the homeland remained under construction as pragmatic Turkish officials sought to make the most out of a rapidly changing geopolitical situation.[56] In the case of the 1930s Turkish-Iranian border as well, it would not be wrong to argue that republican Turkey, maintaining unrivalled order within its borders was as – if not more – important than maintaining the exact course of those borders. Moreover, both the military action and the subsequent revision, though received with displeasure on the other side of the border, were seen as entirely just and fair on the Turkish side. Interestingly, a similar military action taking place between 1905 and 1911 had been received with displeasure too, by Tehran, while the Porte considered the same action legitimate. Apart from the Sunni Pan-Islamism of Abdülhamit II, Istanbul made a great effort to integrate Sunni Kurdish population of north-western Iran into the Ottoman Empire in order to secure the borderland shaken by 'increasingly militant cross-border Armenian activities.'[57] In such a context, the occupation was maintained with justifications ranging from helping Tehran to provide security, to asserting historical ownership of the territories or responding to demands coming from the local population.[58]

4. At the Negotiating Table: The Soviet Factor

Even though an agreement on a territorial swap was eventually reached by the parties, the negotiation process was not an easy and short one. Until May 1931, diplomatic notes between the foreign ministries were preferred as the method of this process; however, from that month onwards, committees led by Turkish ambassador Hüsrev and Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Ali Foroughi (until recently Iran's ambassador to Turkey) started to convene regularly in Tehran.[59] The primary sticking point hindering progress in the negotiations was Iranian reluctance to give up the Mount Ararat in its totality because of its strategic and military importance for the security of Iran's northwest.[60]

The element making this area so crucial seemed to be the Soviet Union. It was, in fact, the Soviet Union which predominates in Arfa's account of the territorial negotiations. The following, for example is Arfa's description of a conversation between Mustafa Kemal and Foroughi that took place in 1932:

> Forughi [*sic*] was a very gentle and cultured man, and one day, while dining with Atatürk in Ankara, the latter insisted on stressing the strategic necessity for Turkey to have the flank of its defensive position on the Aghri mountains chain facing Russia protected by the Lesser Ararat, the eastern slopes of which belonged to Iran,

55 Altuğ 2020, 47.
56 Balistreri 2022, 29–30.
57 Ateş 2013, 230.
58 *idem*, 232–4.
59 Gerede 1952, 198.
60 Bournoutian 2015, 103.

> in order to complete its system of defence, and Forughi had said that this question could be discussed in Teheran. Atatürk had seized upon this and had prepared a proposal for an exchange of territory, which had to be put to us by the dynamic and purposeful Tewfiq Rushtu [*sic*].[61]

Arfa's recollection is noteworthy because it grounds the discussion without mentioning the Kurdish rebellions or the related security problems stemming from these insurgencies, instead prioritizing Turkey's 'defensive position on the Aghri mountains chain facing Russia.' Regardless of whether the omission of Kurds and Kurdish uprisings from the story was intentional or unintentional, it remains an indicator that Turkey persisted in this border revision at least in part because it perceived the Soviet Union as a threat during early Republican period – despite the 1925 Soviet-Turkish Neutrality and Non-Aggression Treaty, which it prolonged with protocols signed in 1929 and 1931.

Actually, in the case of the Ararat Rebellion, Soviet and Turkish aims were not that different. Both sides were concerned about the strength and resilience of their authority on their respective sides of the border and tried to establish it in 1920s. They particularly hoped to avoid any public disturbances, power vacuums, or hostilities with neighboring countries that might bring the possibility of a direct or indirect intervention by outside powers, like the British. In the Caucasus, Soviet rule had only recently been consolidated over Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in 1924, and any kind of cross-border rebellion could have easily ruined all efforts to stabilize the Soviet rule in the area.[62] Moscow reinforced its goal of regional stability by signing a set of non-aggression treaties with Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan in 1920s. (Turkey signed a similar agreement, on this basis, with Iran in 1926.)

In such a context, the cross-border Ararat Rebellions did not serve Soviet interests in the region. Soviet suspicion was compounded by the intense involvement in the rebellion of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), which had been ousted in 1921 from the sovietizing Republic of Armenia. Believing, they could benefit from the rebellion for their own causes, including 'the repatriation of those deported to their ancestral homeland,' the ARF's tenth world congress had decided to become involved through aid or direct participation.[63] The ARF's actions, including pressure on the Shah's government not to compromise with Turkey and to allow the rebellious factions to use the Iranian territory, did not escape the Moscow's notice, however. The Soviets had already declared the Ararat rebellion a product of 'British gold' and identified the events as a British intrigue 'to further their own ends in the Near East.'[64] While armed conflicts continued in the summer of 1930, the situation started to change in favor of Turkey, as the Soviet Union, aware of the risk of the rebellion

61 Arfa, 1964, 230.
62 Wesson 1969, 48.
63 Moumdjian 2018, 185–95.
64 Fischer 1960, 539. For documentation of Soviet appraoches to the Ararat Rebellions, see: Perinçek 2011, 130–64.

destabilizing its own rule in the Soviet Armenia, threatened Iran by sending military troops into Iran to make the government of the Shah alter their policy of ignoring the rebellious factions on the Ararat.[65] The Soviets also helped Turkey by sealing the Araxes border, patrolling the Soviet Armenia-Turkey border, and opening the Soviet rail facilities for Turkish use.[66] Having secured active Soviet policy in the region, Turkish forces entered Iranian territory to encircle the Mount Ararat and suppress the rebellion fully.

Despite Mustafa Kemal's claim (to the Iranians) that it was the Soviet threat which necessitated a border revision, it is obvious that the Soviets themselves played a crucial role in the course of the rebellion by helping Turkey and changing Iran's attitude. Regardless of Moscow's exact motivations in the region, Turkey took full advantage of the Soviet intervention into the rebellion, isolating Iran in the region and curtailing its response to Turkish military incursion into its territory. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Iran accepted what had been brought to the table by Turkey immediately and willingly. During negotiations, mainly because of Iranian concerns on strategic significance of the Mount Ararat, Iran insisted on the approval and implementation of the 1913 Protocol between Iran and the Ottoman Empire instead of a border revision. The validity of this protocol also constituted a question mark in Iranian-Iraqi relations at the time, making stepping back more complex for the Iranian government, as it would have generated uncertainty for Iranian foreign affairs regarding possible outcomes.[67] The Iranian government even considered appealing to the League of Nations to demand an arbitration of the border, an offer not accepted by Turkey, not yet a member of the League at the time.[68] In the end, a compromise was reached in January 1932, after the final points of dispute were concluded by Reza Shah himself, whose arbitration was proposed by Tevfik Rüştü, the Turkish foreign minister. The Shah put an end to the dispute with the following words:

> It is not this or that hill which is important: it is the settlement, once and for all, of our frontier disputes with Turkey. The disagreements between our two countries in the past, which have always been to the profit of our enemies, must cease, and a sincere friendship based on our mutual interests be established between Iran and Turkey. If we are allied and united, I do not fear anybody.[69]

Reza Shah's approval, to a large extent, of Turkey's demands, may be due to his genuine search for an end to border disputes blocking the road to friendship, or to his realization that a military confrontation with Turkish forces already holding the area was not deemed feasible, or both of these.

Turkey had the advantage of clear preferences and chose revision as *the* solution because it believed that the rebellions in the region could only be stopped by con-

65 Moumdjıan 2018, 190.
66 McDowall 2004, 205.
67 Çetinsaya 1999, 161.
68 As 2010, 244–5.
69 Arfa 1966, 231.

trolling the 'problematic geography,' all of Mount Ararat including the Lesser Ararat, as a whole. Nevertheless, this 'pragmatic' approach to national territory was not self-evident, something seen in attempts by the Turkish elite to try and convince the Turkish public about its justifications for this border revision. A column by Yunus Nadi in *Cumhuriyet* declared confidently that 'the issue between Iran and Turkey is about security and public order, not about borders. Thus, it is not giving and taking national lands; but rather, establishing and sustaining permanent order and security.'[70] Such discourse sought to legitimize the revision in the eyes of nationalist critics on both sides of the border. Iranian officials were the audience for justifications as well. Hüsrev, Turkey's ambassador to Tehran during these negotiations, quoted Prime Minister İsmet: 'We do not harm anyone, but when it comes to self-defense, no one should think that this country would hesitate.'[71] Such discourse stood in as a disclaimer of liability if Turkey were to launch operations near the border and encounter Iranian forces 'on the way.'

Finally, the timing of the negotiation, at the start of the 1930s, was critical. It is unlikely that this story of territorial revision could have taken place after World War II, due to the new setting of the international system and Turkey's position in it. First, the early 1930s marked the start of an era of revisionism, whose most prominent examples would occur in Europe. Interwar Turkey certainly did not pursue revisionism to the same extent as other European states of that time. Nevertheless, calling it a 'humble believer in the status quo' would not reflect the truth, either. Ankara could and did profit from an international environment that enabled revisionism, seen not only in the revision of the Turkish-Iranian border in 1932 (with some further minor modifications in 1937), but, more prominently, the annexation of Sanjak of Alexandretta in 1939. The regional political context, too, must be taken into account. For the interwar Middle East, the borders that had been drawn after the war continued to be seen as vague, with several people doubting their long-term future.[72] This regional mentality on the borders might have helped countries to make some revisions more easily and legitimize these revisions as long as the post-war order had not yet become entirely established. Finally, such international actions always had a domestic component as well. As the example of the Turkish-Iranian border revision demonstrates, the government responded to domestic problems not only with active engagement and a strong state appearance at home, but also with a very active foreign policy initiative to give an end to the problem, enabled by the international and regional political context of that time.

5. Conclusion: A 'Non-Revisionist' Border Revision?

In an article published in *Milliyet* on 5 January 1932, Ahmet Şükrü [Esmer], who had covered the Lausanne proceedings as a journalist, celebrated the agreement that 'the Gazi's Turkey' and 'Pahlavi Iran' had reached on their common border. Ahmet Şükrü

70 Yunus Nadi 1931, 1.
71 Gerede 1952, 22.
72 Bein 2017, 7.

argued that reconciliation on the border had led to a win-win situation: an exchange of mountainous territory in the north for more fertile land in the south; yet, most importantly, 'the Turks had won the hearts of the Iranians and the Iranians those of the Turks.'[73] Did this really happen? Were any 'hearts' won over? The answer to these questions can only be given by Turkish and Iranian diplomats, state officials, and people living in the exchanged areas, of course. Nonetheless, a few words can be said on how to interpret this 'reconciliation' from a historical perspective.

The governments of nation-states can make pragmatic choices even though these choices do not comply with their ideology, at least at the level of discourse. In the case of the Turkish-Iranian border, it is apparent that Turkish officials were motivated to take pragmatic measures to stop the waves of revolts that had continued because rebellious factions had made tactical use of geography and international borders to escape pursuit. Since nation-state discourse and ideology are based primarily on that state being the sole authority within its borders, ignoring such a threat, targeting the very heart of the core the principles of the nation-state mentality, was not seen as an option. Another point that has to be underscored is the significance of the international and regional political context on Turkey's perceptions of its borders. The 1930s were years of revisionism both in Europe and in Asia, and officials in early republican Turkey did also appeal such policies to achieve some pragmatic ends in a few cases when the conditions allowed. In this case, the attitude of the Soviets, which prioritized the stability in the Caucasus and acted accordingly, created an appropriate environment for Turkey to suppress the rebellion by entering Iranian soil and achieve the territorial exchange it had proposed.

The 'pro-status quo' approach generally ascribed to Turkish foreign policy during the early years of the republic thus requires qualification. State discourse was based on the *Misak-ı Millî* and the inviolability of national borders; however, as had been the case in Moscow, on the question of Batumi, or at Lausanne, on the questions of Thrace and Mosul, the borders of the *Misak-ı Millî* could be subjected to some concessions to achieve relatively more important goals. For a newly founded state, whose economic and demographic base had already been devastated by long years of wars, avoiding a new war can be counted among these goals. Nevertheless, the situation in the 1930s was even more stark: The audacious risk taken by Turkey on the way to achieving this pragmatic end, entering Iranian soil without the consent of Iran to ensure a *fait accompli* should not be ignored. This, meanwhile, points to something deeper regarding the way the nation-state relates to its territory and authority within its borders. The nation-state does not tolerate any contender to power that uses armed force to challenge the supreme authority of the central state, and to eliminate any challenge, it may even risk becoming embroiled in a war with another state.

Finally, this account directly disaffirms the current cliché regarding the way Turkish-Iranian borders have remained 'unchanged' since the Qasr-e Shirin/Zohab Treaty. The cliché may have been formed and used by administrations of both sides as a legit-

73 Ahmet Şükrü 1932, 1.

imizing component while claiming historical ownership of a disputed land piece, or it might have been utilized as a booster by those who try to convince both populations of their nonaggressive attitude towards each other and friendliness, at least for a few centuries. Yet the Qasr-e Shirin/Zohab Treaty constituted only one, albeit momentous, part within the greater story of the making of Turkish-Iranian borders. The border *did* change, along with the ideologies, regimes, and mutual perceptions on each side of it.

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