The Movement of the Provinces: Tribe and Nation in the Late Ottoman Period (1910-1914)
Djene Bajalan
American University of Iraq

Much of the literary on the Kurdish movement in the late Ottoman period has focused on the activities of a select group of Kurdish intellectuals and professionals residing primarily in Istanbul. This elite, although largely committed to the continuation of the Ottoman Empire (at least until the end of the First World War), played an extremely important role in the articulation of the idea that the Kurds constituted a distinct ‘national’ community. However, this overemphasis pro-Ottoman Istanbul-based Kurdish elite presents partial picture of Kurdish activism and the growth of ‘national’ agitation in the late Ottoman period. This paper takes an alternative perspective by examining process of political mobilization in the Kurdish inhabited provinces of Eastern Anatolia, and more specifically, the relationship between tribal militancy and nationalist/separatist agitation. A number of academics and Kurdish intellectuals have posited the idea that tribalism stymied the growth of Kurdish nationalism. However, the reality is more nuanced. By examining the period between 1910 and 1914, this paper shows that ‘nationalism’ provided an ideology of ‘co-ordination’ which brought together anti-Ottoman intellectuals such as Abdürrezzak Bedirhan and tribal leaders who felt their interests threatened by the centralizing efforts of the ‘Young Turk’ administration and the rise of Armenian nationalism. Understanding the emergence of a Kurdish movement in the provinces in the years leading up to the First World War is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it calls into the question the assumption that Kurdish separatist nationalism was a post-1918 development. Secondly, and more broadly, the movement that emerged between 1910 and 1914 constitute the proto-type for Kurdish nationalist political mobilization in later historical eras, in which Kurdish ‘nationhood’ provided an discursive framework which could, under certain circumstances, bring together intellectual and tribal elites.