

## Decentralization Reform Demands of the Notables of Mardin in the Context of Arab Nation Thought (1913-1915)

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**Citation:** Özcoşar, I. and Deniz, M. S. (2025). Decentralization Reform Demands of the Notables of Mardin in the Context of Arab Nation Thought (1913-1915), *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 10(2), 2040-2051. <https://doi.org/10.1064753/jcasc.v10i2.1903>

**Published:** November 15, 2025

### ABSTRACT

In 1913, the notables of Mardin requested from the Ottoman central authority that Mardin and its surroundings be separated from Diyarbekir and transformed into a new province, and that the official language of the new province to be established be Arabic. According to the notables, the people of Diyarbekir and Mardin were ethnically different from each other. However, the Cezire region, consisting of Mardin, Zahro, Zor and Kevkeb, was an Arab country with ethnic integrity. Therefore, the new province to be established in the Cezire region centered in Mardin would be a more manageable administrative unit due to ethnic integrity. The request, which clearly emphasized Arab ethnicity, language and geography, contained the signatures of many notables. Starting from this point, this study examines whether the idea of an Arab nation had a mass base in Mardin on the eve of World War I.

**Keywords:** Mardin, Arab Nationalism, Diyarbekir, Jazira

### INTRODUCTION

The development of the early Arab nationalism and the formation of the Arab nation thought have started to be subject to academic studies from the 1920s (Antonius 1939; Khairallah 1919; Khalidi 1991:50; Sezer 2017:2). Many ideas different from one another have been put forward so far regarding the resources of the early Arab nationalism, its dynamics and the initiation in regards to what should be understood from the definitions of *nation* or *nationalism*. According to George Antonius and some other historians who conducted studies on this issue, the nation thought was Western originated and thus it was transferred to the Arab world from Europe (Dawn 1991:3). Its transfer to the Arab world and acceptance in the Arab geography occurred starting from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century where a dense interaction was taking place between the West and the East (Ahmad 2014:112; Antonius 1939:13–15; Dawn 1973:123; Lewis 2002:189–91; Tibi 1991:12). Events like occupation of Egypt by Napoleon, extensive use of printing machine in Egypt, Arab literature renaissance (*al-nahda al adabi*), Mehmet Ali Pasha's governorship of Egypt, sending Egyptian students to Europe for education and Western missionary activities laid the ground for formation of the nation thought among Arabs (Dawn 1973:260–80; Hourani 2013:103–90; İnayet 1997:37–42; Kılınçkaya 2015:33–34; Lewis 2002:180–91; Zeine 1973:30–45). Starting from 1960s, Zeine, Hourani, Dawn and some other historians referred to as “revisionist historians”, developed a new point of view regarding to the origins of the Arab nation thought on the contrary of the views of Antonius and others. Revisionist historians whose views were based on various archive documents and memories of pioneers of Arab nationalism, have addressed the formation of the nation thought among Arabs mostly in relation to

dynamics such as “Islam, Islamic modernism and anti-imperialism” but without totally neglecting the Western influence (Dawn 1973:260–81; Hourani 2013:103–90; Zeine 1973:30–45).

Although there is a long history of different dynamics influencing the birth of Arab nation thought, its emergence as an ideology and a determining political factor corresponds to the near past. It is possible to date this phenomenon back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Haim 1962:3; Hourani 1991:308–10, 2013:262). In this context, the Ottoman-Russian War in 1877-1878 is accepted as a turning point. The Berlin Treaty signed after the war brought independence to various nations in the Balkans in one hand, and helped Arab nation thought in Syria gain a political character on the other hand (Karpat 2002:547). When the Russian armies approached Istanbul, the notables of Damascus who were gathered around Abdulkadir of Algeria started to seek ways to declare independence in case the Ottoman State fell. This situation showed that the religious loyalty to the Ottoman Caliph was weakened among Syrian Arabs and the nation thought had evolved to a political framework (Karpat 2009:71–74). The Battle of Tripoli and The Balkan Wars, which occurred in early 20<sup>th</sup> century created a similar impact in the region.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Arabic speaking communities were living in a vast geography that included the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq, Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. The idea of nationalism showed its influence in most of the Arab geography in the few years following the First World War. However the appearance of the nationalist thought showed difference as per regions (Lewis 2002:190–91). While this idea emerged as an ideology integrated with decentralization based administrative and financial autonomy in regions directly under Ottoman central authority such as Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, it was more shaped around anti-colonialism in places subject to Western imperialist expansion such as Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco (Hourani 1991:308–10). In the Arabian Peninsula on the other hand, there were different dynamics. The Hejaz region of the peninsula, which included the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, had a partial autonomy within the administrative structure of the Ottoman Empire. The Wahhabi doctrine that viewed the modernization/westernization activities, which started to be observed within the state structure starting from the reign of Selim III, as deviation from the commands of God and distancing from the religion, formed the ideological basis of thought, which later turned to be the first Arab revolt in the Peninsula (Zeine 1973:34–35).

Although different dynamics are pointed for being the emergence and source of the Arab nation idea, there are points on which consensus is available. One of the common recognitions in the literature is that the Arab nation thought has started as an intellectual movement. According to this belief, the Arab nation thought remained as an ideology defended by a bunch of Arab intellectuals for a long time around Damascus, Beirut and Cairo until early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Ahmed 2014:20; Hourani 1991:308–10). Even though ideas and activities of Muslim and Christian intellectuals from different regions like Tahtawi, Jamal' al-din Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, Boutrus al-Boustani, Ibrahim al-Yaziji, Ahmed Faris al-Shidyak and Abdurrahman Al-Kawakibi were argued for being nationalistic or not, they played a key role in shaping the Arab nation thought. Another widespread acceptance on the subject is that World War I. was a historical development in terms of the evolution of Arab nationalism. Accordingly; Arab national thought completed its development by ending its long period of intellectual thought with the war (Ochsenwald 1991:189). The rebellion that Sherif Hussein started against the Ottoman central authority in the Arabian Peninsula during the war paved the way for the Arab national idea to find a mass response among the people (Kılınçkaya 2015:33–34). In other words, the Arab nation idea moved from theory to practice with the Sherif Hussein's rebellion.

The idea of nation, its reflections in the Arab countries under the Ottoman Empire's sovereignty, has long been the subject of academic studies in different aspects, as mentioned above. However, there seems to be no study available on the formation and development of the Arab nation idea in the area located in the Eastern Provinces of the country, where the Kurdish population is predominant. Mardin Sanjak, which was affiliated to the Diyarbekir province, is an administrative unit with a dense Arab population, despite being located in the administrative area of the Eastern Provinces. This article attempts to fill the gap in the literature by addressing the formation of the nation order in Mardin and its immediate surroundings.

## Decentralization Reform Demands of the Notables of Mardin

While the Balkan Wars were ongoing, the notables of Mardin<sup>1</sup> demanded from the Ottoman central authority some reforms based on decentralization of the region<sup>2</sup> Simultaneously with the Mardin notables, some political formations from Damascus, Beirut and Cairo were also demanding reforms from the Ottoman central authority. The literature on the subject has generally addressed the reform calls centered in Damascus, Beirut and Cairo in the context of Arab nationalist thought. Based on this, this study discusses whether the decentralized reform demands of the Mardin notables and the intellectual foundations of these demands can be addressed in the context of Arab nationalist thought. The main reference source of the study was the telegraph texts written by Mardin notables and sent to Istanbul in 1913 and 1915 and other official correspondence between the provincial center Diyarbekir and the capital Istanbul on the subject (BOA, BEO, 4130/309692 1913; BOA, BEO, 4165/312349 1913; BOA, DH.İD, 144/26 1913; BOA, DH.İ.UM.EK, 7/66 1915; BOA, İ.DH, 1500/56 1913).

The Mardin notables were apparently demanding that the Mardin province be separated from the Diyarbekir province and turned into an administrative unit directly under the Ottoman central authority. In addition, they were also making demands such as the establishment of a new ethnically based province, declaring Arabic as the official language in the region, and conducting education activities in Arabic instead of Turkish at all levels. In the Ottoman State, where the official language was Turkish in its constitution, the demands of the Mardin notables were quite striking. The reform demand text named as *Mahzar*<sup>3</sup> had signatures of many individuals (BOA, DH.İD, 144/26 1913; BOA, DH.İ.UM.EK, 7/66 1915). The signatories were prominent figures of Mardin. By looking at the social status and number of the figures, this study examined whether the idea of decentralized reform and the nationalist thought that followed it had a mass base in Mardin and its immediate vicinity on the eve of World War I. As will be detailed in the following sections of the study, among those who signed the petitions were Assyrians, Kurds and Armenians along with Arabs. Although the vast majority was urban, there were also notables from tribes and other social layers. For this reason, throughout our study, instead of a specific ethnic affiliation definition for the group demanding reform, we preferred to use the terms Mardin notables or just notables.

While the Mardin notables were making these demands (May 1913), the leading Arab societies with political goals, such as al-Lamarkaziyya and al-Fattat, were calling for a national congress to be held in Paris to discuss the framework of the decentralized reforms planned to be carried out in the Arab countries (Khairallah 1919:47–48). A few months before the call, the Beirut Reform Society (Beyrut Cemiyet-i Islahiyesi) had also carried out a similar activity (Selam 2009:100–111). The reform demands of the Mardin notables corresponded exactly to the time period between these two developments. Moreover, there were great similarities between the content of the demands voiced in Beirut, Mardin and Paris. Based on this, this study also attempted to clarify whether the Mardin notables acted together with the political formations in Beirut, Cairo and Paris.

The calls for decentralization reform centered on Beirut and Paris were not independent of the political developments of the period. Some political developments that occurred in this period such as the Tripoli War, Balkan Wars and the Babiâli Raid<sup>4</sup> reshaped the political mind and domination practices of the Ottoman central authority. Libya, an Arab province, was left to Italy almost without a fight after a small resistance with the Tripoli War. At the same time, Italy, which wanted to draw the Ottoman Empire to the peace table during the war, bombarded the Port of Beirut in the Eastern Mediterranean (Childs 1990:122). These developments caused Arab

<sup>1</sup> The concept of notable is synonymous with the term land proprietor and is often used together. “Proprietor and notable” defines the prominent powerful individuals or families which organize the relations between the state and the people in Ottoman city society. Especially from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, they became both representatives of the subjects and officials who assisted the bureaucrats of the central authority in provincial administration. Rich merchants, tradesmen, old and experienced people, scholars, imams, preachers, well-known clergymen, sheikhs of religious orders constitute this group. Therefore, it is possible to define all of the individuals who signed the reform demands of the people of Mardin as “notables.” However, in the relevant archive texts, the social status of some individuals is specifically stated as “notables,” such as “Abdulrezzak from the notables, Sheikh Musa from the notables.” (Ergenç 1982:106; Hourani 1968:41–68, 1981:5–6; Mert 1991:195)

<sup>2</sup> Mardin is currently a province in Türkiye located in the northeast of Aleppo, northwest of Mosul and southeast of Diyarbekir.

<sup>3</sup> Petitions with multiple signatures written to official authorities expressing complaints, requests and thanks on a specific subject (İpsirli 2003:398; Pakalın 1983:391).

<sup>4</sup> The Babiâli Raid was a coup d'état carried out on January 23, 1913, when a group of Union and Progress Committee members led by Enver Bey and Talat Bey raided the government building known as Babiâli. During the raid, Minister of War Nazım Pasha was killed and Grand Vizier Kamil Pasha was forced to resign. After the coup, the Mahmut Şevket Pasha government was established and the absolute power of the Union and Progress Party began (Ahmad 1969:121–22; Tunaya 2000:510–16).

deputies to strongly oppose the government in the sessions of the Chamber of Deputies. These developments discussed in the sessions of the Assembly of Deputies<sup>5</sup> caused Arab deputies to harshly criticize the government (Kayali 1997:107). Before the Tripoli War had ended, the Balkan Wars began with the attacks of Greece, Bulgaria, Montenegro and Serbia. At the end of the two-year war, the Ottoman Empire lost most of its lands in the Balkan Peninsula. The land losses in the Balkan Peninsula made the Arab countries even more important for the Ottoman Empire (Raymond 1996:115). Arab political elites and intellectuals who demanded decentralized reforms in Damascus, Beirut and Cairo were also aware of the changing political equation. On the other hand, while the Balkan Wars were ongoing, the Committee of Union and Progress came to power absolutely by eliminating the opposition with the Babîali Raid<sup>6</sup>. From that date onwards, the Committee, leaving its liberal policies aside, began to strive to build a modern nation-state by overcoming the empire's multinational handicap with the Ottoman identity (Hourani 2013:281–82; Zeine 1973:73–74). For this reason, it ignored the rising demands for decentralization reform in Arab countries for a while. However, Arab political elites and intellectuals, under the influence of the political equation mentioned above, objected to the idea of the Union and Progress Society's Ottoman supra-identity on the eve of World War I. and began to voice their demands for decentralization reform more loudly (Sezer 2017:86). The huge territorial losses in the Balkan Wars did not leave the Committee of Union and Progress the opportunity to suppress or ignore these demands.

The Unionist Mahmut Şevket Pasha government, established after the Babîali Raid, took two important steps in early 1913 towards the rising demands for reform in Arab countries. First, it enacted the *Law on the General Administration of the Provinces* (LGAP) in mid-March. In fact, the law had no direct relation to Arab countries. However, it took a direct step in this regard with the *Arab Lands Reform Program* a month later. As will be detailed below, the mentioned two steps of the government had a significant impact on the formation of the reform demands of the Mardin notables. In addition to the two steps of the government mentioned, it is thought that the activities of the *Beirut Reform Society* and the *1913 Arab Congress* also had a certain impact on the formation of the demands of the Mardin notables. Therefore, before moving on to the reform demands of the Mardin notables, it is necessary to briefly mention these developments in order to establish the basis of our study.

### LGAP and Arab Lands Reform Program

Consisting of 150 articles, one of which was temporary, the LGAP came into force on March 15, 1913, with a decision by the Council of Ministers (Düstur 1332:186–216). The law gave the Provincial General Assemblies the authority to make proposals to the government regarding changes in the administrative borders of the province. Only the second and third articles of the LGAP are relevant to our study. According to the second article; the shires that were not subject to any province (*ehviye-i gayri mülbaka*) were considered as independent provinces and were made administrative units directly connected to the center. The third article emphasized that any changes within the provincial borders would be subject to the law and that changes in shires or district borders would be possible with the approval of the Ministry of Interior after the decision to be taken in the Provincial General Assemblies.

Through the LGAP it put into effect, the government aimed to suppress decentralization demands, especially in Arab countries, by strengthening local administrations, albeit limited (Kayali 1997:130–33). However, although the law seemed to grant broad authority to the local provincial councils, it was not a very different regulation from the previous law. For instance, the Ministry of Internal Affairs was still authorized to appoint civil servants to the provinces, as it was before. Moreover, the authority of the governor, who represented the central authority, was increased even more when compared to the previous law (Ahmad 2014:20). Therefore, the new law that came into effect seemed far from meeting even the most basic demands of the reformists, as will be discussed below. Although the government initially argued that the LGAP was an administrative regulation that would meet all decentralization demands, it was soon forced to take a new step by taking into account the objections in the Arab countries.

Taking the objections into consideration, the government prepared a new reform/improvement program for the Arab provinces. The program entered into effect on April 15, 1913, after being approved by the sultan. Accordingly, in the provinces where Arabs were the majority, legal applications (*istid'a*), judicial inquiries (*istintak*), trials and correspondence regarding the implementation of court decisions would be conducted in Arabic - as before. In addition, the program stated that while educational activities in primary, secondary and high schools would be allowed to be conducted in Arabic, it would be mandatory for Turkish to be taught perfectly in these

<sup>5</sup> The Ottoman parliament in the capital city Istanbul.

<sup>6</sup> The organization that led to the re-declaration of the Constitutional Monarchy on July 23, 1913. It became a political party after the declaration of the Constitutional Monarchy. Although it was active in the parliament until the Babîali Raid on January 13, 1913, it could not form a government. After this date, it was the political party in power without interruption until the end of World War I. (Ahmad 1969; Tunaya 2000)

schools. Therefore, it was emphasized that teachers to be assigned to schools in Arab countries by the central administration would have to be proficient in both Turkish and Arabic, and that civil servants to be employed in these countries, in addition to teachers, would also be required to know both languages (BOA, BEO, 4165/312349 1913)

### **Beirut Reform Society and Paris Arab Congress**

The establishment of the Beirut Reform Society and the convening of the Paris Arab Congress were developments related to the transition to a constitutional order in the Ottoman Empire. The re-declaration of the Constitutional Monarchy on July 23, 1908 was met with enthusiasm in the Arab countries as well as in the rest of the country (Ahmed 2014:112–13; Kansu 1997:111–12; Selam 2009:81–82). In the elections held in November–December 1908, which resulted with the victory of the Committee of Union and Progress, 60 deputies from the Arab provinces were elected to the parliament (Ahmed and Rustow 1976:246). However the enthusiasm for parliamentary rule in the Arab provinces did not last long (Zeine 1973:86). Damascus, in particular, quickly became the center of the opposition against the Committee of Union and Progress. Because Damascus and its surroundings were the regions most exposed to the centralist policies of the government (İnayet 1997:257–58). Arab deputies acted together with the opposition Freedom and Accord Party, which was shaped around decentralization policies. Although the party was successful in the 1911 by-elections, it failed in the 1912 general elections, which were marked by oppression and violence. Despite this, it had an impact on the decentralized practices of the Kamil Pasha government established after the elections.

One of the decentralized actions of the Kamil Pasha government was to request reports from Beirut, Syria and Aleppo on reforms to be carried out in Arab countries (BOA, BEO, 4130/309692 1913). The most striking reform report during this period was prepared by the Beirut Reform Society. The report made the following recommendations to the government:

1. Issues such as foreign affairs, military affairs, and tax collection remain under the authority of the central government as they were in the past,
2. The transfer of the internal affairs of Beirut to the Provincial General Assembly,
3. As before, civil servants such as the governor, judge, treasurer, tax director, postal and telegraph director and gendarmerie commander will be appointed to Beirut from the center, but these people will be required to be proficient in Arabic,
4. All official transactions within the administrative borders of Beirut are to be conducted in Arabic,
5. Acceptance of Arabic as the second official language in the Assembly of Deputies and the Assembly of Notables,
6. The duration of military service should be reduced to two years and military service should be performed within the province during peacetime,
7. Foreign inspectors and undersecretaries might be appointed to the province, provided that they know one of the languages of Arabic, Turkish or French (The article that became the most controversial issue in later periods) (Selam 2009:100–111).

While the Beirut Reform Society was preparing the reform report, the Babiâli Raid mentioned above took place in Istanbul and the Kamil Pasha government was dismissed. The Mahmut Şevket Pasha government that came to power ended the activities of the Beirut Reform Society that led the reform efforts in the province (Kayalı 1997:130–31).

The termination of the activities of the Beirut Reform Society mobilized al-Fattat, an Arab society with political aims. On April 4, 1913, they contacted al-Lamarkaziya, another Arab society operating in Egypt, and prepared a text calling for the first Arab Congress. In the call text, they stated that the international community had made various decisions regarding Syria and other Arab provinces, that they would protect their homeland on the basis of decentralization against possible invasions of the Arab provinces and that they would protect the Arab people against foreign oppressions and pressures, and that they had decided to convene a congress to represent the Arabs and voice their political/social demands (Khairallah 1919:47–48).

The planned congress began its work in Paris on June 18, 1913. In addition to 23 delegates, approximately 200 other people attended the congress. On the same day, former member of the Assembly of Deputies, Abdulhamid al-Zahrawi, was elected as the president of the congress, and Shukri Ghanem as his deputy. At the end of the three-day congress, a final declaration consisting of 13 articles was published. The final declaration included the decisions to ensure the participation of Ottoman Arabs in the central administration, to establish a decentralized administration in Syria and each of the Arab provinces according to need, to put into effect the reform program accepted by the Beirut Reform Society dated January 31, 1913 mentioned above, and to accept Arabic as the official language in all Arab provinces, especially Syria. On the other hand, despite its harsh criticisms of the congress, the Union and Progress Society sent Secretary General Mithat Şükrü Bey to Paris to meet with the organizers of the congress. The aim was to minimize the impact that the congress could create.

## Telegrams Sent from Mardin to Istanbul

As stated above, shortly after the LGAP and the Arab Homeland Reform Program came into effect, the Mardin notables took action to change the administrative borders of the region and clarified their demands on the subject in telegrams sent from Mardin to Istanbul on different dates. Three of the telegrams were written in 1913, and two in 1915. Apart from this, according to what is understood from between the lines of official correspondence, some of the texts demanding reforms were sent to the Diyarbekir provincial authority. However, the texts sent to the provincial authority could not be accessed.

In the first telegram dated May 3, 1913, sent to the Grand Deputy, the State Council and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the following demands were briefly listed:

Mardin and its surroundings should be separated from Diyarbekir province and transformed into a new independent province. Because Mardin is a land of Jazeera rather than Diyarbekir. Mardin should be the center of the newly established province because it is strategically located at the most dominant point of the Jazeera region.

There is an ethnic unity between Mardin, Zor, Zakho and Kawkab in the Jazeera region. Therefore, the new province to be formed should consist of the mentioned cities.

If the formation of an independent province is not possible, Mardin should be transformed into an independent shire.

Mardin, which should be an independent administrative unit, is governed as a shire connected to Diyarbekir only because of geographical proximity according to the current division. Despite geographical proximity, the people of Diyarbekir and Mardin belong to different ethnic affiliations.

It is incomprehensible that two people who do not understand each other's language are in the same administrative unit only because of geographical proximity. Under normal conditions, ethnic affiliation is always a matter of consideration in shaping the administrative structure of the state. For some reason, this matter has been ignored in the Mardin-Diyarbekir example.

The unrest that has emerged due to ethnic conflicts, as security in Mardin cannot be provided from Diyarbekir, has caused the region to remain underdeveloped.

Mardin and its surroundings have very fertile lands. As in the past, it provides a high tax income to the state treasury today. In contrast, Mardin cannot benefit sufficiently from the public services provided by the state in trade, craftsmanship, agricultural production, education and other areas of social life. While it is possible to build roads, schools and factories in Mardin with the tax revenues collected, the region is deprived of these services. The sole reason for this situation is that Mardin is connected to Diyarbekir or is not directly connected to the center.

Mardin deserves to be an independent administrative unit due to its population density and land area. There is no other administrative unit in the Ottoman Empire that has the population density and land area of Mardin and is not an independent unit.

The change in administrative division is also important in terms of the state's general policies. For example, Kawkab and its surroundings, located just south of Mardin, is a region where Arab tribes live densely. The reformation of tribes is an important issue that the state has been focusing on for a long time. The reformation of the Arab tribes in Kawkab and its surroundings is only possible with the establishment of an independent administrative unit centered in Mardin (BOA, DH.ID, 144/26 1913:2-4).

The second telegram is dated May 24, 1913. The demands expressed in the previous telegram were clarified:

1. It is understood that the government is preparing for a radical reform in the administrative field. In this context, the government plans to declare Arabic as the official language in Arab lands. However, Mardin is not among the Arab lands mentioned. This situation deeply affects the people of Mardin.
2. The reason why Mardin is excluded from the reforms to be made in Arab lands is that it is administratively connected to Diyarbekir.
3. An administrative arrangement should be made in such a way that the people of Mardin can also benefit from the reforms planned for Arab lands.
4. Mardin, a city of Cezire, is a purely Arab land in ethnic terms. Because "all" of the people of Mardin speak Arabic.
5. Apart from speaking Arabic, Mardin is also ethnically Arab. Namely; the entire city center of Mardin is Arab. When considered in terms of Sanjak, the majority of the people living in the districts and villages outside the city center and the tribal communities living in the region are Arabs.
6. The use of Arabic in official business and transactions in Mardin and its surroundings is of vital importance. Since the people cannot speak and write Turkish, the current official language, they have great difficulties in benefiting from public services provided by government departments, especially the courts.

7. Mardin is deprived of public services due to the language problem and also has significant problems in the field of education. The fact that the language of education in the region is Turkish, causes Mardin children, whose mother tongue is Arabic, to face serious problems in education..
8. When the new issues mentioned are taken into consideration, it can be seen how necessary it is to establish a new province consisting of 'Mardin, Zakho, Zor and Kawkab' or to transform Mardin into an independent shire.
9. The current administrative structure (being connected to Diyarbekir) is the reason why Mardin remains underdeveloped in every sense (BOA, DH.İD, 144/26 1913:7-9) .

The third telegram, dated June 5, 1913, was a summary of the second telegram and was signed by the representatives of the city's non-Muslim community. Three issues were underlined in this telegram:

1. The establishment of an independent province in the region with the center being Mardin is a common demand of all Muslim and Christian people of the city.
2. Arabic should be declared the "official language" in the province of Mardin to be established. Because all the people living in Mardin are Arabs.
3. Mardin lags behind in every field because it is administratively connected to Diyarbekir (BOA, DH.İD, 144/26 1913:13-15).

The notables of Mardin also made certain demands in 1915; however, they had abandoned their earlier demands for decentralization (BOA, DH.İ.U.M.EK, 7/66 1915).

### **The Reaction of the Ottoman Central Administration to the Demands**

The Mardin notables notified the Ottoman central authority of their demands for reform in a legal manner and in accordance with the bureaucratic hierarchy. They followed up on their demands in a similar manner. As mentioned above, the first telegram of the Mardin notables was dated May 3, 1913. Approximately four months before this date (January 30, 1913), the people of Beirut had made similar demands. It was mentioned above that the government's approach to the people of Beirut's demands for reform was not very positive. So, did the Ottoman central authority approach the demands of the Mardin notables differently? What kind of a strategy did it develop against demands that also had political contexts? Only the correspondence between the Ottoman central authority and the Diyarbakır governorate on the subject will be included under this heading. The evaluation of the correspondence will be discussed under the next heading.

The first reaction to the demands of the Mardin notables on May 3 came from the Diyarbakır Governor Celal Bey. The governor was uneasy about the demands. He informed the Ministry of Internal Affairs of his uneasiness with a coded telegram on May 18. According to Celal Bey, the reform demand text sent by the Mardin notables to Istanbul and the written text sent to the province were different from each other. The demands were stated more clearly in the text sent to the province. Accordingly, the Mardin notables were not demanding an ordinary change in administrative borders. Their main aim was to give Mardin the *status of an Arab land*. They were also quite insistent on their demands. Therefore, they could have caused unpleasant incidents. Governor Celal Bey stated that he had taken the necessary military measures against a possible movement from Mardin<sup>7</sup>.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs sent its opinion on the request of the Mardin notables to the Diyarbekir governorship on May 19. The Ministry's approach to the requests was cautious. According to the Ministry, the requests were about an ordinary change in administrative borders. Therefore, the Ministry referred to the LGAP and reminded that the Provincial General Assemblies were authorized to change the administrative borders of shires, districts and sub-districts. Therefore, the telegram from Mardin had nothing to do with the Ministry of Internal Affairs or other central institutions in Istanbul. In this context, it requested that the Diyarbekir Provincial General Assembly convene and take into consideration the request from Mardin and make the necessary decision (BOA, DH.İD, 144/26 1913:1).

Governor Celal Bey sent the opinion letter from the Ministry of Internal Affairs to Mardin shortly afterwards. Although their demands were relatively positively received, the notables of Mardin still objected to the opinion letter of the Ministry. They had several objections. Their objections were primarily to the referral of their demands to the Diyarbekir Provincial General Assembly. They stated that their demands were more related to the general political, administrative and economic interests of the state and therefore the institution or institutions that would discuss and decide on their demands were in Istanbul, not Diyarbekir. They also objected to the Ministry of Internal Affairs referring their demands to the LGAP. According to the notables, the third article of the LGAP only gave the Provincial General Assemblies the authority to change the administrative centers of the shires and determine the borders of the shires. Therefore, there was no explanation in the third

<sup>7</sup> Ate archive document that Governor Celal Bey mentioned could not be accessed. Therefore other details regarding this document are unknown.

article regarding the transformation of a shire into an independent province by separating it from the province to which it was attached. They also thought that the Diyarbekir Provincial Council would not be able to act impartially regarding their demands (BOA, DH.İD, 144/26 1913:10-12).

The Ministry of Internal Affairs abandoned its cautious approach with the second telegram dated May 24. The reason was, as mentioned above, the Mardin notables were demanding the free use of Arabic in all public institutions in the second telegram. In other words, they were clearly making a political demand. The Ministry of Internal Affairs immediately asked the Diyarbekir governor for his opinion on the telegram in question. The Ministry, like Governor Celal Bey, had begun to realize that the Mardin notables were not demanding an ordinary change in administrative borders (BOA, DH.İD, 144/26 1913:6). The opinion letter requested from Diyarbekir did not reach Istanbul for a long time because at that very moment there was a change of duty in the Diyarbekir governorship. Ismail Hakkı Bey was appointed instead of Celal Bey (BOA, BEO, 4210/315708 1913; BOA, İ.MMS, 166/5 1913; BOA, İ.MMS, 166/10 1913; BOA, MV, 231/111 1913; BOA, MV, 231/118 1913). The new governor, without wasting any time, made an investigation on the subject and reported his opinion to the Ministry on June 16. In his opinion, he first confirmed the former governor's opinion that "the real aim of the people of Mardin is to give the Mardin Sanjak the status of an *Arab land*." According to Governor Ismail Bey, the claims of the notables were baseless and the ethnic structure of the region was quite different from what the notables were talking about. He stated that the ethnic-based population of the region was as follows:

	Arabs	Syriac	Kurds
<b>Mardin Central Town</b>	33.404	11.693	24.240
<b>Cizre</b>	Unavailable	3.155	18.485
<b>Midyat</b>	Unavailable	15.262	42.723
<b>Nusaybin</b>	1.750	2.701	9.303
<b>Savur</b>	14.521	1.385	30.164
<b>Total</b>	45.715	34.196	124.915

In the last sentence of his opinion, he stated that the majority of the Mardin population was Kurdish and therefore the demand for Arabic to be declared the official language in the region was not in line with the current conditions and situation (*maslahat*) (BOA, DH.İD, 144/26 1913:16)

There was no response from Istanbul to Governor İsmail Hakkı Bey's opinion letter dated June 16. No other letter was sent to the Ministry of Internal Affairs from the governor's office on the subject. The Mardin notables, on the other hand, began to wait for the Diyarbekir Provincial General Assembly to convene in accordance with the directive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and for a decision to be made regarding their demands. The wait lasted two years. As stated above, the notables asked about the outcome of their demands in March/April 1915. They stated that they had made a legal demand and that there were many examples in the Ottoman country regarding the separation of a shire from the central province and the transformation into an independent administrative unit. They stated that Mardin was being discriminated against in this sense (BOA, DH.İ.U.M.EK, 7/66 1915:2-9).

### Evaluation of Reform Demands in the Context of Nationalist Thought

Can the reform demands of the Mardin notables be considered as a product of a nationalist ideology? This question is important because it constitutes the main argument of this article. When the reform demand texts are evaluated as a whole, the Mardin notables saw themselves as a homogeneous community – real or imaginary – in terms of language (Arabic), geography (Cezire) and culture on the eve of World War I. They thought that the people of Mardin were closer to the people of Mosul and Zor than to the people of Diyarbekir in terms of language, elements and other social relations (*in terms of the elements of language and other social relations*). In this context, it is possible to reduce the decentralization reform demands of the Mardin notables to a nationalist ideology. However, it cannot be said that they turned into a politicized mass (*nationalist movement*) that organized and struggled for the goal of domination (*national sovereignty*) – indirectly or explicitly – or that they established an organizational structure. At least, such a conclusion cannot be drawn from the available data.

In the context of nationalist thought, it is possible to examine the telegrams of the notables of Mardin in many aspects. First of all, the notables defined *Arab* in their telegram texts. Accordingly, there were more than one ethnic element (Arab, Kurd, Syriac, and Armenian) in the city center and its immediate vicinity. However, the common language of communication of these different ethnic elements was Arabic. Although they had different ethnic elements, since their common language of communication was Arabic, almost all of Mardin and its immediate vicinity were *Arabs*. This definition, which was based on language, was quite modern and new for Mardin and its immediate vicinity. As Lewis, Zeine and Masters also stated, the history of the relationship between language (Arab) and the definition of ethnic affiliation (Arab) in the Arab geography is not very old. The

peaceful ethno-religious communities in the region did not define themselves as *Arabs* until recent history, although they called their language *Arabic* (Lewis 1996:322–23; Masters 2013:13–15; Zeine 1973:33). This situation showed that nationalist thought had become a common ideology in Mardin and its immediate surroundings.

The *Arab* definition created by the notables of Mardin was not imposing. On the contrary, it was accepted by other ethnic elements and communities resident in the city. For instance, under the phrase “...the Mardin sanjak, whose entire population are Arabs sons of Arabs...” in the telegram dated June 5, there were signatures of the Syriac and Armenian representatives resident in the city, as stated above. Since the community representatives defined themselves as *Arabs*, they naturally referred to Arabic as *our mother tongue* (BOA, DH.İD, 144/26 1913:13–15). On the other hand, under the phrase “...Mardin, with its urban, rural and tribal people, is a city of Cezire, the vast majority of which is Arab” in the telegram dated May 24, there were also signatures of the Kurdish notables of the city, especially Abdulkadir Gözi<sup>8</sup>. The definition created showed that there was certain empathy in Mardin despite ethnic differences.

Although accepted by the other ethnic elements of the city, the Ottoman central authority objected to the *Arab* definition of the notables. According to Governor İsmail Hakkı Bey, the significant ethnic elements in the Mardin district at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were Kurds, Arabs and Syriacs. Although their common language of communication was Arabic, Syriacs and Kurds could not be considered *Arabs* because they were separate ethnic elements (BOA, DH.İD, 144/26 1913:16). Therefore, the definition of *Arab* or *nation* by the Mardin notables and the Ottoman central authority did not coincide. In fact, they differed not so much in the content of the *Arab* definition but in the point they wanted to reach. The people of Mardin were trying to include the region in the Arab countries; while the Ottoman central authority was trying to include it in the administrative area of the Eastern Provinces.

The decentralization reform demands of the notables of Mardin seemed to be accepted by a wide social circle in the city. The telegram dated May 3 contained the names of 53 individuals. In terms of occupational distribution, 1 of the 53 individuals was a mufti, 7 were scholars, 14 were notables, and the rest were merchants. The mufti was the only known public official among them. The telegram text dated May 24 contained the names of 35 individuals. Although the number of signatories had decreased compared to the previous telegram text, the occupational profile of the individuals had diversified. The mufti's name was not included in the second telegram. However, instead of the mufti, the name of Mayor Safer Bey, another public official, was included. In addition the second telegram included names of two madrasa teachers, an imam and two mashaikh<sup>9</sup> which were not present in the first one. On the other hand, the number of notables had decreased from 14 to 5 compared to the previous telegram. There was no information about the profession or status of the 5 names at the bottom of the telegram. However, these individuals were probably notables. For example, *Milliizade İbrahim*, as can be understood from his nickname, was one of the leading figures of the Milli tribe, which resided in the region.

The text of the telegram dated June 5<sup>th</sup> only included the names of the city's non-Muslim community representatives, namely the Armenian Catholic Church Deputy Plenipotentiary Vardapet, the Syriac Catholic Church Patriarchal Vicar Anton, the Chaldean Church Plenipotentiary Israel and the Syriac Ancient Church Patriarchal Vicar Cercis (BOA, DH.İD, 144/26 1913:13–15). The names of the community representatives mentioned were not included in the text of the previous two telegrams. However, the telegram dated May 3<sup>rd</sup> included signatures of non-Muslim merchants Cercis, Hanna and Anton (BOA, DH.İD, 144/26 1913:2–4); while the telegram dated May 24<sup>th</sup> included signatures of two non-Muslim merchants both having the name Hanna (BOA, DH.İD, 144/26 1913:7–9). Similarly, among the 61 names listed under the telegram dated March 22, 1915, there were at least five other non-Muslim names, including the Syriac Ancient Patriarchal Vicar Cercis (BOA, DH.İ.UM.EK, 7/66 1915:3). Therefore, it is seen that all ethnic and religious communities in Mardin have made a common demand for reform or have agreed on demands.

The notables of Mardin had used the LGAP and the Arab Homelands Reform Program as legal basis for their demands. However, the demands of the notables did not coincide with the government's reform program. For instance, the notables of Mardin were proposing that Arabic be declared the “official language” in the new province to be established. However, as stated above, the permission for Arabic in the Arab Homelands Reform Program only covered a limited permission in courts and schools. In schools, only Arabic education would be allowed along with a perfect Turkish education. In contrast, the notables wanted Arabic to be the only valid language in education in Mardin. In fact, they were completely against education in Turkish in the region. According to them, education in Turkish did not provide any benefit to the children of Mardin, whose mother tongue was Arabic. This situation shows that the notables of Mardin did not shape their demands solely according to the LGAP and the Arab Homelands Reform Program.

<sup>8</sup> British intelligence reports indicate that Abdulkadir Gözi from Mardin is among the Kurdish notables (Özdemir 2012:163).

<sup>9</sup> It is the plural form of the word “Sheikh”. It means the leaders of the sect, their masters (Pakalın 1983:346–47).

The demands of the Mardin notables were more in line with the developments centered in Syria, Lebanon and Egypt and the Paris Arab Congress called for at that time, rather than the LGAP and the Arab Countries Reform Program<sup>10</sup>. During these dates, nationalist demands were being voiced loudly in Arab countries. The telegram sent from Mardin on June 5, requesting Arabic as the official language, was only two weeks before the Paris Arab Congress. However, there is no direct reference to either the Beirut Reform Society or the Paris Arab Congress in the reform demand texts of the Mardin notables. Not making such a reference was most likely a choice because the Mardin notables were also aware that the government's approach to decentralization/nationalist demands in Arab lands was not very positive.

As stated above, the reform project prepared by the Beirut Reform Society also included a request for Arabic to be declared the official language. The Beirut people's request was later revised by the commission formed under the chairmanship of Governor Edhem Bey as "the official language is Turkish, but the use of the local language is also possible." Therefore, the reform text sent from Beirut to Istanbul did not include an article declaring Arabic the official language. In this case, it can be said that the first time a request was made by the notables of Mardin to declare Arabic the official language in a certain region of the Ottoman Empire with an official application.

Was an institutional structure similar to the Beirut Reform Society established in Mardin for the demand for reform? How and where were the issues demanded from the Ottoman central authority negotiated? Were the names listed below the telegram texts members of an association formed for reforms? If there was such an association, what was its name? Apart from the mayor, the mufti and the representatives of non-Muslim communities, did the individuals listed below the telegram texts hold any public office? Was the Mardin governor of the period, Şevket Bey, involved in the formation of these reform demands? In light of the archive documents of the period, these questions remain unanswered for now. However, it is seen that Şevket Bey, who had been serving as the governor of Mardin since April 1911, was dismissed from his post with a Sultanate decree (*İrade*) dated August 7, 1913. The letter dated two days ago (August 5) regarding the dismissal of the governor sent by the Ministry of Internal Affairs to the Grand Vizier's Office is noteworthy. The letter stated that considering the strategic location (*importance*) of Mardin, it would not be right for the governor to continue his duty (BOA, BEO, 3887/291516 1911; BOA, İDH, 1500/56 1913). This situation strengthens the possibility that the decision to dismiss Governor Şevket Bey was related to the reform demands of the Mardin notables.

The reform demands formed around Beirut-Paris had an administrative, military, political, financial and cultural dimension and had an inclusive feature that included all Arab countries under the Ottoman Empire's sovereignty. However, the reform demands of the people of Mardin did not include issues such as financial and military autonomy, limiting the powers of the governor representing the central authority, or increasing the powers of the Provincial General Assembly. However, it is possible to say that the reform demands of the people of Mardin were more nationalist in terms of Arabic being the sole official language in the province to be established and all educational/judicial activities being conducted in Arabic. On the other hand, the people of Mardin primarily had a problem of making the central authority accept that Mardin and its surroundings were an Arab country. Therefore, there was a fundamental difference between the reform demands formed around Mardin and the reform demands formed around Beirut-Paris.

## CONCLUSION

At the beginning of the 20th century, the notables of Mardin saw themselves as different from the people of Diyarbekir; they saw themselves as homogeneous or sympathetic to the people of Cezire in many ways. The homogeneity or difference in question was centered on the factors of *language* (Arabic) and *element* (Arab). According to the statements of the notables of Mardin in their reform demand texts; Diyarbekir and Mardin, although geographically close, should be separated into two different administrative units because there was no common *element* or *language* between them. On the other hand, the Cezire region, to which Mardin belonged, was an Arab country with a common element and language between them. Therefore, Arabic should be declared the official language in the new administrative unit to be formed in the Cezire region. Moreover, Arabic should be the sole language of education in the region. It is seen that the decentralized reform demands of the notables of Mardin have an intellectual depth that can form the basis for nationalist thought.

The demands for reform were not the thoughts of a few intellectuals or a narrow elite group who thought differently, but rather a mass appeal text that was accepted by other social segments of the city. Some of the texts included the names of 50-60 individuals. Among the individuals mentioned were the names of many notables, primarily the mayor of the city, the mufti, and representatives of non-Muslim communities. Furthermore, as

<sup>10</sup> However, there is no direct reference in the minds of the people of Mardin to either the Beirut Reform Society or the Paris Arab Congress.

understood from the official correspondence between the provincial center of Diyarbekir and the capital city of Istanbul, the notables were insistent and determined on their demands for reform. Judging by the social status and number of those demanding reform, it is clear that the idea of reform or nationalist thought in Mardin had a mass base on the eve of World War I.

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