

[Fred Aprim](#)

April 1, 2025

The original 1597 publication of *Sharafnama* by Sharaf al-Din Bitlisi, also known as Sharaf Khan, relied exclusively on Arabic and Persian sources. This was not unusual, given the period and circumstances in which *Sharafnama* was composed. It remains one of the few texts produced before the 19th century that addresses Kurdish history. It was published in Persian, because Kurdish literary written language lacked in the 16th century.¹

Sharafnama, or the *Book of Honour*, is regarded as a historical work, because it lists the names of various Kurdish tribes, regions, and their respective leaders—who are sometimes given titles such as emir, khan, or beg—often portraying them as more significant than many of them actually were, particularly when the title of emir is applied broadly. It is essential to recognise that these tribal leaders and their territories were vassals of existing empires and dynasties. Furthermore, it must be understood that the Kurdish self-ruled regions, referred to as principalities—especially those in the eastern Ottoman Empire—existed only with the approval of Ottoman sultans.

Historians estimate that approximately 40 copies of *Sharafnama* are held in libraries in England and France or catalogued in Oriental collections throughout Europe and the Middle East. As the book gained popularity, and because most Kurdish tribal rulers and chieftains within the Ottoman Empire were generally unable to read the Persian text, some of them initiated translation projects in the 17th century to render the work into Turkish, the official language of the Ottoman Empire. Some Kurdish tribal leaders regarded *Sharafnama* as a reliable historical source for their own tribal and family histories. They instructed their scribes to use the text as a foundation for writing personal biographies, continuing where *Sharafnama* left off. In the 19th century, H. A. Barb translated the work into German. The first Kurdish translation, into Kurmanji, was completed in 1858 by Mahmoud Bayazidi but was not published until 1986 in Moscow. Russian translations followed in 1862, and a French translation by F. B. Charmoy was completed in 1869. Two Arabic translations were produced in Baghdad and Cairo in 1953 and 1958, respectively². In 1972, Kurdish poet and scholar A. Sharafkandi translated the work into Sorani, using the Persian text edited by M. Abbassi (Tehran, 1955), alongside the Arabic translation.

¹ Accessed 3/27/2025 <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/kurdish-written-literature>

² In the Arabic translation by Mohammad Ali Awni, a Kurd as well, the translator makes commentaries and concludes on page xxviii that the Kurdish nation is the oldest of the Iranian nations and that it (the Kurdish nation) established a great civilization on the greater Iranian plateau and its domination spread from Indus valley in the east to the Euphrates in the west and Kurdish language, under the term Pahlavi, prevailed in that vast region until the invasion of Alexander the Great. See Sharaf Khan Bitlisi, *Sharafnama*, Book II. Arabic Translation by Mohammad Ali Awni. Dar al-Zaman for Printing, Publication and Distribution, Second Printing. Damascus. 2006.

Many subsequent attempts have been made to translate or edit *Sharafnama*, often using texts that were themselves translations or edited versions of earlier translations. Critics argue that in such cases, modifications have inevitably appeared in some of the later publications, raising questions about the accuracy of those versions.³



المقالة الخامسة والخمسين من تخطيط أسيا من كتاب ترجمة جغرافية لمطربون العربية (ص ١٢١).

يتلخص من هذا كله بان الأمة الكردية من أهدم الأمم الإيرانية التي أنست حضارة زاوية في هضبة إيران الكبرى، فامتد سلطانها من وادي السند شرقاً، إلى وادي الفرات غرباً، وسادت لغتها الكردية باسم اللغة البهلوية أو البهلوانان أي الأبطال، والمحاربين، في جميع بلدان الإمبراطورية الإيرانية الأولى، التي قضى عليها الإسكندر المقدوني، فأعقبها بعد مدة من الزمن ملوك الطوائف، الذين يقال لهم في التواريخ الفارسية الإشكانيين، الذين هم أخذوا حيناً من الدهر يتطاحنون ويتنازعون السيادة الإيرانية العليا، إلى أن تغلب ملك إقليم فارس (مقاطعة شيراز) على سائر ملوك الطوائف الإيرانية، فأسس إمبراطورية إيرانية ثانية دعيت فيما بعد بالساسانية. وأصبحت كلمة فارس مترادفة مع كلمة إيران، تطلق على كل ما هو إيراني قديماً، وحديثاً. مما أدى إلى وصف الإمبراطورية الإيرانية الأولى بالفارسية، مع أنها كانت كردية بهلوية. لأن الأمة الفارسية مع عراقها في الحضارة الإيرانية، والمجد الفارسي؛ فإنها أحدث عهداً من شقيقتها الأمة الكردية، التي سبقتها في تأسيس الحضارات الإيرانية الأولى.

محمد علي عوني
مترجم تركي و فارسي بديوات جلالة الملك بمصر

وما هي أسماء المصادر التي استعنت بها في جمع هذه العجالة و كتابة التعليقات على الأعلام الواردة في شرفنامه:

مسالك الأبحار - التعريف بالمصطلح الشريف - صبح الأعشى - معجم البلدان - مرصد الإطلاع - قاموس الأعلام التركي- الإنسكلوبيديا الإنكليزية - دائرة المعارف الإسلامية بالفرنسية - وغيرها من الكتب التاريخية الجغرافية التركية، والفارسية، وبعض مذكرات، ورحلات كردية خصوصية.

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بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم
عنوان الكتاب: شرفنامه
الجزء الثاني: في تاريخ سلاطين آل عثمان
ومعاصريهم من حكام إيران وتوران
تأليف: الأمير شرف خان البدليسي
ترجمة: محمد علي عوني
الطبعة الأولى: عام 1962
الطبعة الثانية: 2006
الناشر: دار الزمان للطباعة والنشر والتوزيع
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موافقة وزارة الإعلام بالطباعة رقم ٩٠٠٤٠ تاريخ ٢٠٠٥/٩/١٢

³ Anwar Soltani. *The Sharafnama of Bitlisi: Manuscript Copies, Translations and Appendixes*. Presented to the International Conference on the Sharafnama in Berlin, 1-3 May, 1998.

In 2005, an English translation by Prof. Mehrdad Izady was published. However, as a Kurdish nationalist and historian, Izady also included his own critical commentaries. Politicising historical accounts or applying modern concepts of nationalism to centuries old historical texts had resulted in distorted versions of the original works in many cases.

It is highly misleading to suggest that the Kurdish tribes of the 16th to 19th centuries were nationalistic. We read: “*the political and social interaction between the Ottoman Empire and Kurdish tribes, which can be traced back to the first quarter of the 16th century, continued until the modern [Turkish] republic with various continuities and ruptures. This multi-dimensional and complex relationship was neither in the form of absolute loyalty to the sultan, and thus to the Islamic caliph on a religious basis, nor a constant revolt against the authority of the empire in order to preserve their autonomy. Until the beginning of the 20th century, [Kurdish] tribes were not only structures used by the Ottoman, Safavid, and Russian empires for their own interests. They were also organizations capable of dominating a certain geographical area and had a vital potential to constantly generate violence and extend it to the empires and even between one another.*”⁴

The ongoing violent conflicts between the Soran and Bohtan Kurdish tribes provide one example, while the battles between Bahdinan, Baban, and Soran in the 19th century are another.⁵ These Kurdish tribes were frequently at war with one another, seeking expansion and dominance⁶, and their policies and alliances often shifted, even within the same family. For instance, Rüstem Bey, the head of the Çemişgezek principality, was killed by the Ottoman Sultan Selim for supporting the Safavid Shah Ismail I; however, his son Pir Hüseyin Bey allied with the Ottomans and fought against the Safavids.⁷ Moreover, the title of Izady’s new English version, *The Sharafnama: Or the History of the Kurdish Nation*, inaccurately represents the original work, which is simply titled *Sharafnama*.⁸ This trend began with the 1858 Kurmanji translation, published as *Sharafnama: The History of Kurdistan*.

In recent years, Kurds have portrayed Sharaf Khan as a national hero, with his name being used for structures and institutions ranging from Erbil to Diyarbakir. Nothing could be further from the truth. The concept of ethnic nation-building and national sentiments did not exist in the 16th century. In fact, the publication of *Sharafnama* was born out of the rivalry between the Ottomans and Safavids, and the Bitlisi family shifted their loyalty from the Safavids to the Ottomans. Sharaf Khan undoubtedly reflected a pro-Ottoman stance in this conflict and not a Kurdish national stand.

⁴ Yalçın Çakmak and Tuncay Şur. *Margins of Allegiance and Revolt: Relations between Kurdish Tribes and the State from the Late Ottoman Period to the Early Modern Republic*. In International Journal of Conflict and Violence (IJCV): Vol. 16/2022.

⁵ Accessed 3/24/2025 <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/bahdinan-kurdish-region-river-dialect-group-and-amirate>

⁶ This struggle for the tribal benefit and not Kurdish nation continues even today. Consider the 1994-1997 Kurdish civil war between the Barzani and Talabani where the Barzani in 1996 requested the help from Arabist Saddam Hussein to force the Talabani out from Arbil, which the Talabani was controlling at the time.

⁷ See Sharaf Khan, 1971.

⁸ Djene Rhys Bajalan. *Sheref Khan's Sharafnama: Kurdish Ethno-Politics in the Early Modern World, Its Meaning and Its Legacy*. Iranian Studies, volume 45, number 6, November 2012.

As a nationalist, Izady takes the liberty of interpreting Sharaf Khan's thoughts and making speculative commentaries on his intentions. Throughout Izady's translation, readers can easily observe the anachronistic approach he adopts, attempting to transport Sharaf Khan from his 16th-century context into a 20th-century nationalist framework. The reality is that there was little evidence of "Kurdish national sentiments" as we understand them today in the 16th century. Bajalan explains the point he raised above by showing that in his original text, Sharaf Khan clearly "*presents the Kurds as loyal subjects of the Ottomans. Crucial in this is the religious affinity between the Kurds and the Sunni Ottomans. As the conflict with Iran escalated in the sixteenth century, the Ottoman state increasingly attempted to present itself as the champion of "orthodox" Sunni Islam vis-a-vis "heretical" Shi'ite Islam represented by the Safavid dynasty. Sharaf Khan commends the Ottoman sultan for being the champion of Islam and the protector against "innovation and perversion."*"⁹

Sharaf Khan also claims various historical and mythical figures as being of Kurdish origin. For example, he asserts that the legendary hero Rostam bin Zal, one of the key figures in Hakim Abu al-Qasem Ferdowsi's (940–1025) Persian poetic epic *Shahnameh*, was a Kurd. Sharaf Khan writes: "*As it is understood, the name "Kurd" was given to them [the Kurds] as a soubriquet due to the great degree of their bravery. The proof is that many famous heroes of the past and many well-known braves have come from this heroic nation. For example, the famous hero Rostam bin Zal who lived at the time of Kayqubad was of them [Kurds]. Since this hero was born in the region of Sistan he became famous as Rostam of Zal. The Shahnameh's writer Ferdowsi introduces him as Rostam the Kurd.*"

Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, or the *Book of Kings*, has had a profound influence on Persian culture and identity. It has become an essential part of the Persian literary canon, preserving many historical and cultural aspects of ancient Iran. Ferdowsi's work also helped to preserve and promote the Persian language, as he wrote the *Shahnameh* in classical Persian, which significantly impacted the development of the modern Persian language. The adventures of Rostam, a legendary hero renowned for his unparalleled strength and bravery, include epic battles against formidable foes and illustrate the archetypal hero's journey, marked by trials and triumphs. His character embodies the virtues of honour and loyalty. In contrast to Rostam, characters such as Zahhak and Afrasiab represent the darker side of human nature. Zahhak, a tyrant cursed with serpents on his shoulders, symbolises evil and corruption, while Afrasiab embodies the perpetual adversary, representing the constant struggle against oppressive forces. These characters highlight the epic's moral framework, emphasising the eternal conflict between good and evil.¹⁰

Bitlisi's words did not sit well with Izady on two fronts. Firstly, the mythical story of the cruel Iranian king Zahhak, where half of the children were slaughtered, and the other half were saved by the executioner—who in time multiplied and became the Kurds—is, according to Nikitin, the opinion of the Kurds themselves. This undermines the claims of Kurdish

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Accessed 3/24/2025 <https://www.untoldpersia.com/the-epic-of-ferdowsis-shahnameh/>

nationalists. It is interesting to mention that some on-line Kurdish activists have published a modified version of this epic story by indicating that Zakhak was a cruel Assyrian king (not Iranian). This is intended to inflame the sentiments of the uninformed young Kurds against the indigenous Assyrians.

ما هو رأي الأكراد في أصلهم ؟

إن أهم وثيقة تاريخية تعبر عن رأي الأكراد في هذا الموضوع هو كتاب « شرف - نامه » وقد كتبه باللغة الفارسية أمير شرف خان بدليسي عام ١٥٩٦ . ويروي مؤلفه أسطورة الطاغية « زهاق » ويزعم أنه كان ملكاً إيرانياً أصابه داءٌ غريب وهو أن نبت له في كل كتفٍ أفعى . ولم يستطع الأطباء شفاؤه فنصح له إبليس كي يخفف من حدة ألمه أن يستعمل مرهماً من دماغ أحد الشباب . فأمر بتضحية شابين يومياً . ولكن الجلاد كان خنواً فكان يضحي شاباً ويرحم الثاني مستعيضاً عن دماغه ببنخ خروف . وهرب الشباب الناجون سراً واحتموا في جبال نائية لم تدسها قدم . وهناك نوا وتكاثروا إلى أن أصبحوا شعباً هو الشعب الكردي الذي يعيش من الزراعة وتربية الماشية ويعرف بالبسالة والشجاعة . وقد زعم بعض الكتاب العرب القدامى أن الأكراد هم أبناء الجن . أما الكتاب الأكراد المعاصرون ومنهم محمد علي عوفي والسيد حسين حسني فقد حاولوا أن يبرهنوا بأنهم من أصل هندي أوروبي

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كاليونانيين أنفسهم . ويراهنهم يستند إلى كون لغتهم لغة
إيرانية . 11

Secondly, according to Bajalan, Izady asserted that Sharaf Khan's claims about Rostam bin Zal were merely the result of a misreading of the text. This is attributed to the fact that, in the Persian orthography used in the *Shahnameh* (کرد), the term can be read as both the ethnonym *Kord* (Kurd) and the common noun *gord* (hero). However, as historian Hakan Ozoglu rightly points out, it is improbable that Sharaf Khan misread "gord" as "Kord", given that Sharaf Khan was raised in the Iranian court and undoubtedly read the *Shahnameh*. The tentative conclusion that might be drawn is that Sharaf Khan deliberately manipulated the text of the *Shahnameh* to fit his political agenda—namely, legitimising and glorifying Kurdish society. Bajalan states that Izady represents a particularly virulent strain of Kurdish nationalism, titling his English translation of Book 1 of the *Sharafnama: The Sharafnâma: Or the History of the Kurdish Nation*.¹²

¹¹ Basile Nikitin. *Les Kurdes* (The Kurds). Paris, 1956. Arabic version presented by Salah Barwari.

¹² Djene Rhys Bajalan. *Sheref Khan's Sharafnama: Kurdish Ethno-Politics in the Early Modern World, Its Meaning and Its Legacy*. Iranian Studies, volume 45, number 6, November 2012.

Furthermore, Izady made numerous errors without thoroughly investigating the realities on the ground. According to A. C. S. Peacock, Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Cambridge, Izady claimed that the town of Hasankeyf was completely submerged with water, except for the rock citadel, due to the new Ilisu dam. However, this was untrue, as the dam was not built in the summer of 2005 when Izady was working on the text. There are also issues with Izady's explanations and claims regarding the western and eastern parts of Georgia, where he wrote that Islamic authors expressed a strict distinction between the two parts as *al-Jurz* and *Gurjistan*. Peacock argues, however, that only a few Islamic authors had a clear understanding of Georgia, and their use of terms such as *al-Kurj*, *al-Jurz*, and *al-Abkhaz* was fairly indiscriminate. Additionally, Izady did not work from the original Oxford text but rather from manuscripts that had already undergone various editions. Peacock further stated that Izady's notes should be treated with caution due to the many errors present. For example, Izady's comment that the ritual of chanting and bowing before the rising sun and asking for success at the conclusion is a requirement of the native Kurdish religion of Yazdanism. In Islam, however, this is considered utter blasphemy. Yet, Peacock confirmed there is absolutely nothing about chanting or bowing before the sun in the original text of the *Sharafnama*.¹³

Certain modern-day nationalists have been politicising history on many fronts for obvious reasons. However, the Middle East of the 16th century was a religious world where the Shia Safavids and the Sunni Ottomans ruled, each seeking to impose domination on the region and its people. It is inconceivable that any supposed scholar would suggest nationalism had a foothold in these societies at the time. Professor Izady's insinuations of the nationalist nature of Kurdish Sharaf Khan are laughable. However, the politicisation and nationalisation of religious narratives or personalities are not new to Middle Eastern politics. We are aware of the infamous Arabisation policies, such as the 1960s Iraqi middle and high school history curriculum, which presented the Muslim leader Khalid Ibn al-Walid as an Arab leader of a national freedom movement fighting the invading Byzantines. Many also recall how Pan-Arabist Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser supported a film by the famous Egyptian director Yusuf Shahin, portraying Saladin as an Arab nationalist superhero in the iconic movie (الناصر صلاح الدين) or *Saladin the Victorious*. The Iraqi al-Hurra TV programme (مختلف عليه) or *Debatable* with Ibrahim Essa mentioned that Shahin later regretted this portrayal and even blamed himself for it. In fact, it still remains debatable whether Saladin was a Kurd, given issues related to his geographical birth in central Iraq, his service under Turkmen officials both in Mosul and Aleppo, the Arab nature of his and his family's names, his lack of a claim to Kurdish identity, and the absence of any record indicating he ever spoke Kurdish.¹⁴

Today, Iraqi Kurdish writers and scholars are empowered and supported by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to replicate what the Pan-Arabists previously committed—and

¹³ A. C. S. Peacock. Review. *Prince Sharaf al-Din Bitlisi. The Sharafnama, or, the History of the Kurdish nation-1597-Book One, English Translation and Commentary by M. R. Izady*, Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2005. Source: Iranian Studies, Dec., 2006, Vol 39, No. 4 (Dec., 2006), pp. 600-603.

¹⁴ Accessed 3/24/2025 <https://www.fredaprim.com/pdfs/2025/Saladin.pdf>

continue to commit—against all non-Arabs in the Middle East. Izady¹⁵ is integral to a campaign to rewrite the history of northern Mesopotamia (historic Assyria)¹⁶ and reimpose Kurdistan and an illusory Kurdish history¹⁷ on the historic Assyrian region.¹⁸ The secularisation of a 16th-century religious figure's mind, such as Sharaf Khan's, is a farce. In today's world, it has become incredibly challenging to remain objective towards current events shaping our lives. How, then, can one be objective about events or individuals from 400 years ago? We cannot overlook the fact that even today the majority of the Kurds are heavily drawn towards religion despite the attempts by the political groups to portray the opposite. Consider the fact that between 1980 and 2016, Diyarbakir, Turkiye, the cultural and political heartland of Kurdish nationalism, saw a 56% increase in its mosques. As of 2016, the Kurdish-majority province of Diyarbakir, despite a significantly smaller population of 1.7 million, had more mosques than the Turkish-majority province of Bursa with a population of nearly 3 million people (2,011 versus 1,730).¹⁹ Similarly, despite the small size of the federal region of Iraqi Kurdistan, the region has 5820 mosques, mostly built after the creation of the Kurdish region in 1992 with its Ministry of Endowments employing today over 2,700 Islamic teachers.²⁰ In general, with authority in hand, the Islamic nature of Kurdish society transcended.

Most importantly, in addition to Sharaf Khan's theories regarding the Kurds' origin, he relates to how a number of Kurdish dynasties had geologies leading back to important Arabo-Islamic figures. Consider the rulers of Hakkari were said to be of Abbasids lineage, while the rulers of Cezire were the descendants of Khalid Ibn al-Walid, the Arab general of the early Islamic period mentioned earlier. This apparent contradiction, states Bajalan, can be accounted for by the importance of Islam in the Kurdish identity and, perhaps more significant, in the legitimization of political power in the Islamic world.²¹

Martin Van Bruinessen explains that *during the nineteenth century, while tribesmen referred to themselves as ashiret (tribe) or as Kurd, Muslim peasants were referred to as rayat (subjects), or by a slightly more precise term such as kurmanç in present Turkey. Taking his cue from the works of both Fredrik Barth and the British sociologist Anthony D. Smith on nationalism and ethnicity, Bruinessen argued that until the twentieth century, the Kurds were rather an aristocratic-lateral ethnîe, consisting of tribesmen dominating peasantry and various other population groups considered as less or not at all Kurdish. It was only after the Second World War that the Kurdish nationalist intelligentsia included Kurdish peasants,*

¹⁵ Others beside Mehrdad Izady include Fadhil Mirani, Soran Hamarash and others.

¹⁶ Accessed 3/25/2025.

<https://www.fredaprim.com/pdfs/2006/Kurdish%20Campaign%20to%20Undermine%20Assyrian%20Rights.pdf>

¹⁷ Accessed 3/25/2025 <https://www.fredaprim.com/pdfs/2024/Kurds%20Steal%20Assyrian%20History.pdf>

¹⁸ Accessed 3/25/2025 <https://www.fredaprim.com/pdfs/2024/Izady,%20Kurds%20and%20Neanderthals.pdf>

¹⁹ Mehmet Gurses. Religion and Armed Conflict: Evidence from the Kurdish Conflict in Turkey. Journal For the Scientific Study of Religion. 2020.

²⁰ Accessed 3/25/2025. <https://theinsightinternational.com/mosques-built-iraqi-kurdistan-2023-03-28>

²¹ Djene Rhys Bajalan. *Sheref Khan's Sharafnama: Kurdish Ethno-Politics in the Early Modern World, Its Meaning and Its Legacy*. Iranian Studies, volume 45, number 6, November 2012.

*Kurdish tribesmen and themselves as members of the same nation.*²² Bruinessen later explains that, *the Tanzimat reforms in the Ottoman Empire between 1839 and 1876 had profound effects on the social conditions in Kurdistan. First, the elimination of the tribal Kurdish emirates and the weakness of the Ottoman administration allowed the tribes and religious leaders to gain strength in the course of the nineteenth century. Second, the Land Registration Law of 1858 and the global capitalist market economy combined to give the tribal leaders and urban notables an interest in taking control of land areas in order to exploit them for domestic market production and export. Consequently, however, tensions emerged around land ownership between the former and Christian peasants and notables leading to the first large-scale Armenian massacres between 1894 and 1896. In parallel, the Muslim–Christian boundary became thicker as European powers exploited their ‘right’ to protect ‘religious minorities’ within the borders of the Ottoman Empire to secure their imperial ambitions in the region.*²³ This led to the complete expulsion of the Assyrians and almost all Armenians from the Hakkari and Van vilayets where Kurds control all those lands today.

Presenting the people known today as Kurds as a homogenous nationalistic people four centuries ago is against all known historical facts. Professor Izady has faced significant criticism from the academic community for his questionable work which he tries very hard to impose on his readers. For example, Professor Garnik Asatrian labelled Izady’s 1992 book, *The Kurds: A Concise Handbook*, as “phantasmagoric,” raising concerns about its scholarly reliability. Additionally, Iranologist Richard Foltz asserts that the concept of a Pan-Kurdish proto-religion termed Yazdanism is a fabrication by Izady.

It is undisputed among scholars that the few Kurdish historical texts that existed until the 19th century were never characterized as "Kurdish nationalist texts" as understood in the modern sense. Attempts to force such a wild characterization will never find acceptance in the scholarly world.

Note: *This article of April 1, 2025 is a revised version (additional sources and images added) of the original piece that was published on March 28, 2025.*

²² Michael Eppel. A people without a state: The Kurds from the rise of Islam to the dawn of Nationalism. In Jordi Tejel. “A people without a state: The Kurds from the rise of Islam to the dawn of nationalism, by Michael Eppel.” Middle Eastern Studies. 2016. Accessed 03/27/2025.

file:///C:/Users/Fred/Downloads/A_People_Without_a_State_The_Kurds_from.pdf

²³ Ibid.