


ARTICLE

# Protesting exile: Cretan refugee activists in the late Ottoman Empire

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## Abstract

Focusing on the long aftermath of the July Revolution of 1908 in the Ottoman Empire, this article examines the intellectual and popular climate of protest in the context of a crisis of sovereignty over Crete. Keeping the geographical focus on İstanbul and on the regions receiving tens of thousands of civilians displaced from this Mediterranean island around the turn of the twentieth century, I discuss how multiple segments of a refugee population animated a mass protest movement. Pursuing a multi-class perspective, the article demonstrates how the mobilization of the displaced rested on the actions of mutually reinforcing social clusters: an upper-class cohort of Cretans based in İstanbul and more numerous but equally vocal underprivileged groups from the provinces. Approaching displacement as a condition that generates not only victimhood but also impetus for collective action, I argue that the displaced Cretans became the leading agents of mass politics in the post-revolutionary Empire.

**Keywords:** Crete; displacement; Ottoman Empire; protest; refugees

## Introduction

In early June 1910, a Turkish-language newspaper *Yeni Edirne* (New Adrianople) informed its readers of a protest rally in Kavala, its correspondent in that small city about 150 miles southwest of Edirne giving a detailed account. With a hint of self-importance, the local reporter remarked how the steady press coverage of the political crisis between the Ottoman Empire and Greece over Crete drew thousands for a show of determination to defend the Empire's sovereignty on the island. Held on a Friday in May, a market day with traders and visitors from neighboring villages augmenting the population of Kavala, the rally was attended by a large crowd that filled the central square. Positioning themselves at the windows and roofs overlooking the site of assembly, curious residents observed the demonstrators stream into the area, holding Ottoman flags and placards that bore such inscriptions as "Crete is ours" and "Crete or Death in Crete," the latter being a variation on the most common protest slogan of the time "Crete or Death" (*Ya Girit ya Ölüm*).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Kavala Muhabir-i Mahsusamızdan," *Yeni Edirne*, 11 June 1910 (29 Mayıs 1326).



According to *Yeni Edirne*'s local correspondent, present at the protest was a Cretan refugee who burst into tears as the orators delivered emotional speeches. The anonymous islander was among more than 70,000 refugees dispersed across the Empire in the wake of a civil war and European military intervention in Crete during the late 1890s. Authentic or fictitious, the detail of a weeping refugee illustrates a publishing strategy aimed at mobilizing the sentiments of the reading public. Such sentimental depiction also strikes a chord with the trope of suffering that would come to characterize much of the historiography on Ottoman refugees, a tendency that stems from the pairing of displacement with war.<sup>2</sup>

While it would be faulty and immoral to overlook the misery endured by the displaced and dispossessed, a lachrymose tone in the narrating of forced migration risks obscuring the manifestations of refugee agency. Approaching displacement as a condition that generates not only victimhood but also impetus for collective action, I argue that the displaced Cretans became vocal agents of mass politics in the aftermath of the Constitutional Revolution of 1908. With a focus on an understudied example of refugee activism at a time of widening public space in the Empire, I join an ongoing conversation about envisioning migrants and refugees as resourceful protagonists rather than helpless multitudes. This changing viewpoint of scholarship corresponds to a departure from addressing the displaced mostly in the context of war and as groups that embody the evidence of imperial collapse. It points to a shift of perspective that identifies them as leading actors in the remaking of empire (Blumi 2013; Fratantuono 2019; Hamed-Troyansky 2017; Lorenz 2021).

In studying collective action in the early twentieth-century Empire, scholars have long identified class as a useful lens, with special attention paid to underprivileged groups such as workers and peasants (Çetinkaya 2014; Gara et al. 2011; Quataert 1983). Historians of migration, on the other hand, have shown how refugee elites, composed mostly of intellectuals and politicians from the Empire's borderlands in the Balkans and Caucasus, became agents of change during the same timeframe (Georgeon 1980; Meyer 2014; Shissler 2003; Zürcher 2003). Pursuing a multi-class perspective, this article seeks to further the extant scholarship by demonstrating how Cretan refugee involvement in popular politics rested on the actions of mutually reinforcing social clusters. I posit that it is essential to break down the often-undifferentiated category of refugees into its disparate class components. Accordingly, the article is structured around the activities of deracinated Cretans from distinct socio-economic backgrounds: a segment of mostly middle-class literati based in İstanbul and popular classes in several provincial urban centers. Differences in terms of circumstances of severance from Crete and inequalities regarding the resources at their disposal for coping with the destabilizing experience of dislocation situate the islanders into separate categories. Insular ties between them, however, counterpoise such class divisions. On that account, I envision these otherwise disparate social groups as part of a cohesive network of the displaced held together by a broader island identity. As a contemporary observer put it, "the sense of attachment to native soil" was profound particularly among islanders "whose homeland has visible limits."<sup>3</sup> In brief, this

<sup>2</sup> For two representative examples, see McCarthy (1995) and Şimşir (1968).

<sup>3</sup> Centre des archives diplomatiques (French Foreign Ministry Archives in La Courneuve; CADC), 153 PCOM/74, Paul Blanc to Théophile Delcassé, Hania, 23 March 1899.

article demonstrates the multi-class nature of refugee activism, underscoring it as a process driven by both literate and illiterate classes.

The article's first part focuses on a cohort of notable Cretans in the capital. They include journalists, writers, and politicians who played instrumental roles in making Crete the object of widespread debate in print and beyond, following the Cretan government's announcement of union with Greece in October 1908. Mostly born in Crete during the 1860s and 1870s, members of this diasporic network led the way for shaping the tenor of public debate about their native island through newspaper columns, conferences, and speeches. Main plot points of their accounts rested on the centrality of violence in Crete's recent and distant history. The island was represented as a site soaked in blood, glorified in the example of martyred Ottoman soldiers during its protracted conquest in the seventeenth century and decried in the case of atrocities against Muslim civilians in contemporary episodes of conflict. Such narrative predated 1908, with antecedents that can be traced at least to the 1890s (Uzunçarşılı 1947, 282). During the civil war of that decade multiple Young Turk publications in exile deployed an emotional language to cover the strife.<sup>4</sup> Under the heavy lid of Hamidian censorship on Cretan affairs, however, such coverage reached only a restricted readership.<sup>5</sup> The novelty after 1908, therefore, lies, not in the uniqueness of the rhetoric forged, but in the opening of previously unavailable channels for its dissemination well beyond exilic and underground circles. The diasporic network of Cretans in İstanbul often used the relatively unhindered press and increasingly politicized conference halls to address literate audiences. However, their public outreach transcended the narrower bounds of largely bourgeois sites. They also spearheaded the staging of a protest rally in the Sultanahmed Square in early 1909 with the participation of tens of thousands of people.

This rally in İstanbul also provided a blueprint for mass demonstrations that proliferated farther afield in the following months. Following a brief discussion of the İstanbul rally, the article turns to the provinces, with particular focus on several locations boasting significant numbers of Cretan refugees, to explore the deeds of protesters from less privileged social classes. Although individual names are mostly absent from the archives, an underprivileged refugee footprint in the provincial protest movement stands out in historical documents. In post-revolutionary Ottoman mass politics, Cretan refugees emerged as the drivers of popular action in the streets, repeatedly drawing the attention and ire of European diplomats. Unsympathetic consular reports featuring the activities of the displaced reflect the protest-phobic perception of urban crowds. At the same time, such perspectives also suggest that Cretan refugees were seen as a consolidated social group, notwithstanding manifold

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, when the newspaper *Girit* (Crete) of Geneva published a letter sent from Hania, it portrayed the island's Muslims in a manner aimed to stimulate the sentiments of its readers. It related how Muslim Cretans implored the Ottoman state "with burning hearts and weeping eyes" to safeguard them. *Girit*, "Girit Mektubu," 1 April 1897. For several other examples in this regard, see "En Crète," *Mechveret* (Consultation), 1 April 1897; "Girit Kimindir?" *Hürriyet* (Liberty), 1 September 1897; "Yine Girit," *Doğru Söz* (Righteous Word), 14 June 1906.

<sup>5</sup> A telling example is *Girit Hailesi*, a multi-volume book authored by Hüseyin Nesimi and Mehmet Behçet on the Cretan civil war, which was banned by the Ottoman administration in 1898. Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi (Ottoman State Archives; BOA), Y. MTV. 175/107, 31 March 1898 (8 Zilkade 1315).

differences among them. If a relatively privileged cohort of islanders, articulating the contours of a novel kind of mass politics, represented the intellectual component of a diasporic network on Ottoman mainland, their lower-class co-islanders became its flesh and voice in the streets. In the final section of the article I pay special attention to the activities of the Cretans in İzmir and the coastal towns of Libya.

### Ties beyond the sea: a network of islander literati in İstanbul

In October 1908, the government of Crete announced its union with Greece. The European four-state coalition acting as a supervisor since its military occupation of the island during the civil war of the 1890s exclaimed that it would disallow any change in Crete's autonomous regime. Still, the news sent shockwaves to Ottoman provinces. Severely threatening İstanbul's already tenuous presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, the declaration also unleashed an unprecedented attention to this island, in a reversal from the Hamidian period during which silence reigned in the public space, with the news related to it tightly suppressed. Especially salient in pro-Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) publications, the steady press coverage featured Crete's Muslim minority as a beleaguered community living under oppression and threat of dispersal (Adiyeye 2000). Also, beyond the printed word, human consequences of Crete's civil war of the 1890s were already visible across the Ottoman mainland where more than 70,000 refugees had found new homes chiefly along the Asia Minor coast, northern Libya, and western Syria (Peçe 2024).

Amid the intensifying agitation caused by Crete, a long opinion piece appeared in a June 1910 issue of *Le Jeune Turc*, a French-language daily from İstanbul. This popular publication sold more than 10,000 daily copies around this time (Koloğlu 1992; Ozavci 2020). Penned by *Giridi* (Cretan) Ahmed Saki (b. 1876, Rethimno), a journalist, lawyer, and legal scholar based in the capital, the article caught the attention of the Greek ambassador. He attached a clipping of the newspaper to a report sent to Athens. In it, Ahmed Saki pointed out that "in the wake of the proclamation of our cherished constitution [July 1908], the Ottomans, saved from the tyrannical grip of a nefarious regime of absolutism" felt hopeful for a better future. However, two consecutive blows, Austria-Hungary's annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bulgaria's declaration of independence, shattered the façade of optimism. They also provoked a profound mistrust of the Western powers, discrediting their much-touted espousal of justice and sovereign rights. As deep of a scar as these incidents opened in the Ottoman psyche, Saki considered them a wake-up call: "Awoken from a years-long lethargy, the Ottomans realized that they cannot let Crete face a similar fate and become yet another territory to be lost due to the weakness of the despotic [Hamidian] regime."<sup>6</sup>

What Ahmed Saki referred to was the Cretan government's declaration of union with Greece, announced a day after Austria-Hungary's annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina on October 6, 1908 and two days after Bulgaria's proclamation of independence. He condemned Crete's government both for infringing on the Empire's sovereign rights and for mistreating the island's Muslim minority. The Ottomans, the

<sup>6</sup> The newspaper *Le Jeune Turc* enclosed in Ypiresia Diplomatikou kai Istorikou Arheiou (Hellenic Foreign Ministry Archives; YDIA), A/6, Ambassadorial Report to Foreign Ministry, İstanbul, 16 (3) June 1910.

lawyer-journalist protested, demanded the recognition of their inviolable rights over Crete. They “desire to live, make progress, and march forward enjoying the exact same rights and privileges as other [Western] nations . . . This is the psychology of the Ottoman nation.”<sup>7</sup>

*Le Jeune Turc*'s popularity and high circulation explain why this opinion piece drew the Greek ambassador's attention.<sup>8</sup> The newspaper served as a conduit carrying the CUP's worldviews to the literate public, especially to those not proficient in Turkish. Celal Nuri and Ahmed Saki, both tracing their roots to Crete, played instrumental roles in this regard, the former as editor and the latter as contributor. Moreover, Saki sought to strengthen the existing bonds between the island and the Empire. In his capacity as the representative of the Muslim community of his native Rethimno, he kept the Ottomans abreast of Cretan affairs through his public lectures (Özgün 2019, 179).

The network within which these two individuals operated transcended the confines of a popular newspaper. Both Celal Nuri and Ahmed Saki belonged to a coterie of displaced activists based in Istanbul, who since late 1908 had been raising awareness about their native Crete through articles, conferences, and speeches at protest rallies. The role of this network is critical to understanding how the island emerged as one of the most burning topics in the public space from late 1908 onward. The pioneering activism of this group nurtured a culture of protest in the post-revolutionary Empire. They helped form a widespread perception of their native island in terms of “a matter of life and death,” which was how *Yeni Edirne*, among many others, would describe it in a first-page article in May 1910.<sup>9</sup>

The Istanbul-based diasporic network of middle-class activists would prove its impact by spearheading the largest organized rally that the imperial capital had seen in the aftermath of the Constitutional Revolution. They lay the groundwork for it in early January 1909, when around 200 people gathered in the convention hall of the school of law, half an hour's walk from Sultanahmed Square which would serve as the site of the event several days later.<sup>10</sup> The meeting was presided over by Mustafa Nuri, a senator and minister of the Treasury. Among high-profile attendees were Edhem Pasha, a senator and legendary commander of Ottoman troops on the Thessalian plain during the 1897 war against Greece, and Ali Galib, minister of post and telegraph and ambassador to Greece in the early 1890s. These individuals came together with the goal of weighing the pros and cons of a range of reactions to the Cretan government's declaration of *enosis* (union) with Greece. With the recent example of an effective boycott against Austria-Hungary in mind, and economic warfare being waged in response to that empire's annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, some participants proposed a similar course of action against Greece. Deeming an aggressive strategy a premature option for the time being, the group, however, reached a consensus on mounting a large demonstration in Sultanahmed Square. Several of its members were tasked with its preparations.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Italian diplomats also shared clippings from *Le Jeune Turc*'s multiple issues with their superiors.

<sup>9</sup> “Girit Meselesi Dolayısıyla Miting,” *Yeni Edirne*, 12 May 1910 (29 Nisan 1326).

<sup>10</sup> “Mekteb-i Hukuk'taki İctima ve Girit Meselesi,” *Tanin* (Echo), 6 January 1909 (24 Kanunuevvel 1324).

Although this would not be the first Crete-related rally in response to the declaration of enosis, its organizers intended it to be the largest.<sup>11</sup>

What made this meeting at the school of law especially conspicuous was the composition of its attendees. Nine among them hailed from relatively well-off families rooted in Crete's three principal cities: Hania, Iraklio, and Rethimno. Chairing the meeting as the most senior member, Mustafa Nuri (b. 1851, Iraklio) brought with him years of gubernatorial experience in various Ottoman provinces (Kuneralp 1999, 110). Among other participants was his son, Celal Nuri (b. 1881, Gallipoli), an extraordinarily prolific writer and journalist. He also had a knack for public speaking, as indicated by the address he would deliver before thousands of protesters in the Sultanahmed rally four days later.<sup>12</sup> Another attendee, his cousin Yusuf Razi (b. 1870, Hania), worked for the illustrated Ottoman periodicals *Resimli Kitap* (Illustrated Book) and *Şehbal* (Wing Feather). With a near-native fluency in French, he was also Turkey correspondent of the famous Paris magazine *L'Illustration*. An engineer by training, he became known for his intimate appreciation for music and fine arts, probably thanks to the inspiration of his mother Leyla Saz, an acclaimed poet and musician (Neyzi 1993, 87–109).

Two of the participants came from the ranks of the recently opened Ottoman parliament. Ahmed Nesimi (b. 1876, Hania) was a deputy for İstanbul who went on to become a prominent member of the CUP. He reached the apex of his political career when he became the last Unionist minister of foreign affairs, serving from February 1917 to October 1918 (Kuneralp 1999, 5).<sup>13</sup> The other parliamentarian was Mehmed Ali (b. 1876, Iraklio), representative of Samsun. Another notable attendee was Mehmed Aziz Kavurzade (b. 1866, Hania), a distinguished legal scholar of his generation, renowned especially for his expertise in criminal law. He was not a stranger to the venue of the assembly, for he was an instructor in the law school (Yörük 2008, 115–118).<sup>14</sup> Also there was Ahmed Cevad (b. 1876, Rethimno), with a dazzlingly prolific publishing career lasting into the 1960s, who “wore many hats.” He was a writer, journalist, educator, and recent transplant to İstanbul from Crete, where he had championed the rights of the Muslim minority.<sup>15</sup> During the meeting, Ali Zeki (b. 18xx, Crete), who worked as a correspondent with the influential daily *Tanin*, read out the telegrams sent to that newspaper from Nazilli and Tekfurdağ, which communicated people's concerns about Crete's future.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> “Girit Hakkında Bir İctima-i Mühim,” *İkdam* (Perseverance), 6 January 1909 (24 Kanunuevvel 1324). At the meeting, it was also decided to send telegrams to Manisa and Bartın to convey the appreciation for the smaller rallies organized in these Anatolian towns.

<sup>12</sup> For an exploration of Celal Nuri's ideas, see Norman (2021).

<sup>13</sup> Ahmed Nesimi's brother, Ekmel Bey, served as a deputy in the Cretan parliament in the early 1900s during the period of autonomy. See Ali Zeki, “Girit Hakkında Mülâhazat II,” *Tanin*, 17 December 1908 (4 Kanunuevvel 1324).

<sup>14</sup> Yörük's piece includes a discussion about Mehmed Aziz's work on foreign concessions and privileges in the Empire. Yet another evidence of Cretan intellectual networks in İstanbul is indicated by the fact that his book was published by the Ahmed Saki Bey Printing House.

<sup>15</sup> No English monographs exist on the life and works of Ahmed Cevad (Emre). For a recent MA thesis, see İçen (2021).

<sup>16</sup> “Mekteb-i Hukuk'taki İctima ve Girit Meselesi,” *Tanin*, 6 January 1909 (24 Kanunuevvel 1324).

A trio within this İstanbul-based Cretan contingent merit special recognition for their efforts in making the island a legible geography for the public during late 1908 and early 1909. A brief elaboration on the roles played by Ali Zeki, Ahmed Cevad, and Mustafa Nuri is in order before I examine the provincial protest in the next part.

Two days after the assembly that was held in early January 1909 in the school of law building, an evening conference took place in the same venue with the participation of more than 1,000 people. This large congregation included students, representatives of various political associations, and journalists. The first speaker, Ali Zeki, gave the audience a crash course on the recent history of Crete. Covering the period from the time of European occupation in the 1890s to the present, he recounted the most important developments on the island. At the close of his informative lecture, he described Crete as an autonomous Ottoman province with special administrative privileges and an inseparable part of the Empire, eliciting the enthusiastic applause of the audience.<sup>17</sup> A version of the verbal narrative garnished with Ali Zeki's personal reflections had previously appeared in print. From mid-December 1908 to early 1909, he had published in *Tanin* a four-part series of articles about Cretan history.<sup>18</sup> He began his installments by underlining the significance of publicizing the affairs of Crete for making the Ottomans mindful of its recent past. He provided a dramatic recounting of Crete's last decade as a time of injustice for its much-diminished Muslim population. In so doing, not only did Ali Zeki portray the condition of his fellow islanders in the bleakest terms, but he also indicted the Hamidian regime for preventing their plight from being communicated to the Ottoman public.<sup>19</sup>

Ali Zeki remains a rather obscure figure, of whom hardly any biographical details are known. A few literary specialists have written about him as a writer of short stories and novels (Uslucan 2007). The impact he left in politics is arguably deeper than the one in literature. That aspect of his life too remains unexplored. Particularly important here is his contribution to a growing anti-Greek discourse among CUP circles after 1908. Fluent in Greek like other Cretan Muslims, Ali Zeki put his islander identity into invaluable service of *Tanin*. For this leading Unionist daily, he regularly provided translations from the Greek Ottoman press, focusing on articles critical of the CUP. His formative role was recognized by the famous writer Abdülhak Şinasi (Hisar) in 1921 when he paid an homage to Ali Zeki in the literary criticism column of the magazine *Derqah* (Salon). Writing at the time of Greece's occupation of western Anatolia, Abdülhak Şinasi highlighted the political significance of Ali Zeki's translations for the Turks unaware of the content of Greek publications: "Our naïve and well-meaning press forever remained oblivious of the scornfully antagonistic tone and content of Greek newspapers and magazines published in the capital and in the provinces." Noting the popularity of *Tanin* especially among

<sup>17</sup> "Mekteb-i Hukuk'ta Konferans," *Şura-i Ümmet* (Council of Ummah), 8 January 1909 (26 Kanunuevvel 1324).

<sup>18</sup> They appeared in *Tanin* under the title "Girit Hakkında Mülahazat" on 15 December 1908 (2 Kanunuevvel 1324), 17 December 1908 (4 Kanunuevvel 1324), 21 December 1908 (8 Kanunuevvel 1324), and 3 January 1909 (21 Kanunuevvel 1324).

<sup>19</sup> Ali Zeki, "Girit Hakkında Mülahazat," *Tanin*, 15 December 1908 (2 Kanunuevvel 1324).

military officers, he emphasized its influence to conclude that “Ali Zeki Bey helped lift the veil that covered our eyes.”<sup>20</sup>

After this brief profile of a lesser-known but key figure, let us now revisit the evening conference in the law school in January 1909. Following Ali Zeki’s lecture there on the recent history of Crete, Ahmed Cevad delivered an exposition of the diplomatic crisis triggered by the island. He addressed the antecedents and current state of the Crete question. In his comprehensive account covering the island’s past from the Venetian period onward, he underscored the immeasurable amount of martyrs’ blood shed during its conquest, which lasted longer than a quarter of a century. His occasionally emotional speech was interrupted several times by a storm of applause from the audience. Using Muslim and Turkish interchangeably in identifying Crete’s minority population, Ahmed Cevad dwelled on various “calamities and atrocities” that befell the Turks from 1896 onward. Those sorrowful incidents demonstrated how misguided the Europeans were in viewing “Turks as cruel and bloodthirsty and Greeks as wronged and oppressed.” The violence that intensified during the mid-1890s caused the Muslim population of Crete to diminish to 40,000, a sharp drop from its pre-civil war figure of 100,000.<sup>21</sup>

“Conveyor” is an apt descriptor for Ahmed Cevad, considering how invested he was in the affairs of his native island and how he conveyed the condition of his people to the Ottoman public. Earlier while in Crete, after his 1905 escape from Libyan exile, a banishment endured in the company of several other Young Turks such as Yusuf Akçura, he often served as a conveyor of popular petitions, interceding on several occasions with French and Russian consuls for aggrieved Muslims (Emre 1960, 89–95).

In an emotion-laden article published in a November 1908 issue of *Tanin*, Celal Nuri’s father Mustafa Nuri had prefigured some of the themes that Ali Zeki and Ahmed Cevad conveyed at the school of law. Titled “The Cry of Muslim Cretans,” Mustafa Nuri’s piece communicated both the incrimination of the Hamidian administration (a theme addressed by Ali Zeki) and misery of the Muslim islanders (a subject covered by Ahmed Cevad).<sup>22</sup> For Mustafa Nuri, who would begin to fill a seat in the senate as of December 1908, the history of his native island must have put in sharp relief the contrast between the seventeenth-century conquerors and the Hamidian regime.<sup>23</sup> The former sacrificed their lives to make Crete Ottoman. The latter, on the other hand, with tyrannical indifference and cowardice, abandoned Crete’s Muslims, who were displaced and dispossessed for being failed by the government. Mustafa Nuri called Muslim Cretans “blood-stained victims” of the tragedy they endured under the tyranny of the Hamidian regime. Nevertheless, with a demonstration of abnegation and unselfishness, they overlooked “the ears callous to their resounding cries, the hands indifferent to their pleas for help, and the tongues silent of consoling words.” In the remainder of his article, Mustafa Nuri described another tyranny, this time at the hands of the Cretan government. He exclaimed that this could never be ignored or forgotten. Writing on behalf of all Muslim Cretans, he remarked that they would now submit to the attention of

<sup>20</sup> Abdülhak Şinasi, “Alev Muharriri Ali Zeki Bey ve Romancılık,” *Dergah*, 15 April 1921 (15 Nisan 1337), 12–13.

<sup>21</sup> “Mekteb-i Hukuk’ta Konferans,” *Şura-i Ümmet*, 8 January 1909 (26 Kanunuevvel 1324).

<sup>22</sup> Mustafa Nuri, “Girit Müslümanlarının Feryadı,” *Tanin*, 20 November 1908 (7 Teşrin-i Sani 1324).

<sup>23</sup> His son, Celal Nuri, would later mention the conquerors in name in his speech delivered at the İstanbul protest rally in January 1909 and swore that today’s Ottomans would follow the example set by “those great Ottomans, the Köprülü.” “Dünkü Miting,” *Tanin*, 10 January 1909 (28 Kanunuevvel 1324).



the public “the outcry of [our] protest [*avaze-i şikayet*] and the things that [we] could neither pronounce nor write when [our] mouths were shut and pens bound.”<sup>24</sup>

Mustafa Nuri’s words heralded the outpouring of demonstrators who would soon begin to occupy town squares in the provinces with the cries of “Crete or Death.” Before proceeding into the provinces, I will briefly discuss the İstanbul rally in January 1909, the largest organized one in the late Empire prior to the famous Sultanahmed demonstrations in 1919 held against the Allied occupation (Thompson 2013, 91–96; Yıldırım 2019). Apart from its scope, several aspects of the 1909 rally, I argue, suggest that it served as a model for hundreds of mass gatherings throughout the Empire from early 1909 through 1911. As the first large-scale Crete demonstration that garnered an extensive press coverage, it typifies the late Ottoman mass protest, a practice that became a common feature of civic life, with continuous protests inspired by the island. In more specific terms, if the plethora of Ottoman flags created a visual of collective patriotism in the İstanbul rally, slogans pronouncing the island’s significance generated a characteristic sonic atmosphere. If the delivery of scripted speeches aimed to stimulate the emotions of those present, the ensuing similarly passionate press coverage aimed to convey the details of the event to the reading public. Such attributes related to the form, content, and coverage of the Crete rally in İstanbul would soon manifest themselves in other protests across the provinces.

On the second Saturday of 1909, the people of İstanbul woke up to a morning that progressed into a day abuzz with crowds heading toward the city’s largest square. The sun was shining brightly. As if to bless the masses for evincing a “lofty emotion of patriotism,” mused the poet Halil Nihad, it warmed the dead of winter into a day reminiscent of spring.<sup>25</sup> From early in the morning, people throughout the environs of the capital, from the tranquil Princes’ Islands to picturesque Bosphorus villages, proceeded to Sultanahmed Square, adjoining the seat of the parliament (see Figure 1). The presence of many Ottoman flags waving above the befezzed heads painted the site of assembly in red.<sup>26</sup> The report that the Greek ambassador transmitted to Athens estimated the number of protesters around 15,000, likely a downplayed figure.<sup>27</sup> Describing the scene as “a real human sea” (*une véritable mer humaine*), the French-language daily *Stamboul* (İstanbul) wrote that it was impossible to make an exact

<sup>24</sup> Mustafa Nuri, “Girit Müslümanlarının Feryadı,” *Tanin*, 20 November 1908 (7 Teşrin-i Sani 1324). Mustafa Nuri’s taking on the role of a veteran representative of Cretan Turks was consistent with another duty that he would soon perform. A notice in *Hürriyet* in March 1909 informed the public of the establishment of an association called Girit Cemiyet-i Osmaniyesi (Cretan Ottoman Association) headed by the senator Mustafa Nuri. *Hürriyet* began to be published in İstanbul in early 1909 as the semi-weekly newspaper of this civil society organization. This publication, too, should be seen as part of the active network of notable Cretans in İstanbul. The newspaper was issued by the Ahmed Saki Bey Printing House. *Hürriyet* featured, among other authors, articles by Celal Nuri and Ahmed Saki. “Girit Cemiyet-i Osmaniyesi,” *Hürriyet*, 11 March 1909 (26 Şubat 1324). In the spring of 1909, *Hürriyet* merged with another İstanbul newspaper *Siper-i Saika*, taking the name *Siper-i Saika-i Hürriyet*. The director of the merged newspaper was Ahmed Cevad, who also published in it opinion pieces on Crete as well as the domestic and international politics of the Empire.

<sup>25</sup> Halil Nihad, “Girit İçin,” *Aşyan*, 21 January 1909 (8 Kanunusani 1324).

<sup>26</sup> “Girit Meselesi,” *Şura-i Ümmet*, 10 January 1909 (28 Kanunuevvel 1324).

<sup>27</sup> YDIA, KZ#98.2, Gryparis to Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, İstanbul, 9 January 1909. On the exaggerated end, *Şura-i Ümmet* wrote that more than 200,000 protesters attended the demonstration, “Girit Meselesi,” 10 January 1909 (28 Kanunuevvel 1324).



Figure 1. The massive protest rally of early 1909 in Istanbul's Sultanahmed Square.  
 Source: *Servet-i Fünun* (The Wealth of Knowledge), 28 January 1909 (15 Kanunusani 1324)

count of the crowd which reached at least 25,000.<sup>28</sup> The Austro-Hungarian ambassador gave no numerical information in his dispatch to Vienna but noted a

<sup>28</sup> "Pro Candia: Le Meeting de Sultan-Ahmed," *Sтамبول*, 11 January 1909.

huge mass of protesters. He went on to add that “Crete stands much closer to the Turkish heart than Bosnia and Eastern Rumelia,” an underlined remark in reference to the regions recently annexed by Austria–Hungary and Bulgaria, respectively.<sup>29</sup>

Although the Cretan government’s declaration of enosis with Athens in October 1908 was not recognized by the European guarantor powers overseeing the island’s affairs for the past decade, it thrust the Crete question into the public eye in the Empire. When the inhabitants of İstanbul took to the streets in January 1909, the island’s fate was still hanging in the balance. In an emotional address Celal Nuri dwelled on the theme of martyrdom, summoning the memories of the countless martyrs from the Ottoman conquest of Crete, which lasted for a quarter of a century from 1645 to 1669. Their souls, Celal Nuri exclaimed, gathered above the massive crowd as though menacing to haunt them if the Ottomans acted like prodigal sons squandering a precious inheritance instead of righteous heirs.<sup>30</sup>

The planning for this rally sheds light on how displacement fueled activism in the late Empire. It also points to intergroup solidarities among refugees. One day before the demonstration, Rumeli Muhacirin-i İslamiyesi Cemiyeti (the Association of Rumelian Muslim Refugees) issued a statement in *Tanin*. It asked all the Muslim Balkan refugees to show up to the event in support of their Cretan coreligionists who had been “subjected to years-long atrocities.”<sup>31</sup> On the day of the rally, the representatives of various grassroots associations recounted lamentable stories about those who fled the territories lost in the Balkans since 1878. Their accounts situated the Cretan ordeal within the broader experience of the displacement and dispossession of Muslims in the Ottoman world.<sup>32</sup> At the close of the demonstration, a segment of the crowd followed the rally’s organizing committee to the Sublime Porte where the grand vizier received its Cretan members. After the meeting, Mehmed Aziz Kavurzade, a professor of law, thanked, on behalf of all Muslim islanders, the crowd that waited in front of the seat of the government.<sup>33</sup> Finally, another Cretan, Ahmed Cevad, read aloud a telegram from the island that conveyed the appreciation of his fellow Muslims for this rally.<sup>34</sup> This mass event in the imperial capital was not a spontaneous gathering but the outcome of meticulous planning by a group of activists. Standing at the helm of that network was a coterie of notable Cretans who were aided by the constant front-page coverage of the island affairs by the Ottoman press, particularly pro-CUP publications. In this regard, *Tanin* played a conspicuous role as one of the most influential CUP dailies, to which two Cretans, Ali Zeki and Mustafa Nuri, also contributed.

### “Crete or Death:” protest rallies in the Ottoman provinces

On the heels of the İstanbul demonstration in early January, a flurry of mass rallies occurred in the provinces at a pace to justify dubbing the winter of 1909 the season of

<sup>29</sup> Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv (Family, Court and State Archives of the Austrian State Archives; HHStA), PA XII, Liasse XXVIII, 294, Pallavicini to Aehrenthal, İstanbul, 15 January 1909.

<sup>30</sup> “Dünkü Miting,” *Tanin*, 10 January 1909 (28 Kanunuevvel 1324).

<sup>31</sup> “Girit İçin Miting,” *Tanin*, 8 January 1909 (26 Kanunuevvel 1324).

<sup>32</sup> British National Archives (BNA), FO 421/255, Gerard Lowther to Edward Grey, İstanbul, 14 January 1909.

<sup>33</sup> “Pro Candia: Le Meeting de Sultan-Ahmed,” *Stamboul*, 11 January 1909.

<sup>34</sup> “Girit Meselesi,” *Şura-i Ümmet*, 10 January 1909 (28 Kanunuevvel 1324).



ازمیرده دائرهٔ عسکریه اوکنده کرید ایچون عقد اولنان میتینغلردن بر منظره « فوطو: حلیم لوندات »

Grand meeting organisé à Smyrne en faveur de l'île de Crète.

( Photo: Halim.)

**Figure 2.** A protest rally for Crete staged in Izmir.

Source: *Resimli Kitap*, no. 33, October 1911

popular protest. Although smaller than the Istanbul demonstration, steady provincial rallies from early 1909 onwards showcase how a novel type of mass politics became a regular affair outside of the capital, especially thanks to the efforts of the local CUP branches (see Figure 2). The novelty of open-air mass political gatherings, usually as preplanned events, in post-revolutionary Empire bears emphasizing. As Noémi Lévy-Aksu remarks, the Hamidian administration, in power for more than three decades, prohibited popular rallies on political issues, an indication “of the intrusive state intervention into social and private life to which the new regime was expected to put an end” (Lévy-Aksu 2017, 215). Indeed, the core of the CUP’s rhetoric rested on its claim to be the staunchest advocate of the popular will. One of its manifestations was protest rallies swelled by imperial citizens. Seeing that such gatherings were mostly organized with a push, gentle or otherwise, from local CUP branches, these events also helped Unionists tap into and boost their skills of mobilization.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> The Italian consul in Ioannina mentioned that the military officers stationed there exchanged two visits with the Greek Orthodox archbishop to ensure the participation of the Greek Ottoman community in a planned rally. Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (Italian Diplomatic Archives; ASDMAE), 215, Augusto Stranieri to Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ioannina, 20 August 1909.

The telegrams that rally organizers from various towns sent to the daily *Tanin* are telling examples of the diffusion of the narrative formulated by the Cretan network in İstanbul, a script evocative of violence and sacrifice. In those telegrams published by *Tanin* in January 1909, Ottoman patriots in Gallipoli, for instance, avowed the determination to sacrifice their lives to safeguard Crete. Muslim inhabitants of Lesbos pronounced the impossibility of ceding Crete to Greece so long as “the Mediterranean undulated with the blood of Ottoman martyrs.” Another one reported an assembly of 3,000 inhabitants in the Black Sea town of İnebolu and transmitted the eagerness of the populace to “shed [our] blood to the last drop” for the land “molded by the blood of [our] ancestors.”<sup>36</sup>

Active involvement of the Cretans became a routine feature of protest rallies held in regions hosting sizable communities of the displaced since the late 1890s. İzmir and its environs especially stood out with a conspicuous refugee presence. Writing in June 1910, amid an intense bout of protest across the Empire, Austro-Hungarian consul August Kral observed that “the agitation against Greece over the Cretan question orchestrated by the Turkish newspapers at the instigation of the Young Turk Committee provoked an extraordinary effervescence among the Muslim population, especially among the Cretan emigrants, who amount to about 16,000 souls.”<sup>37</sup> Another hosting area for thousands of Cretans was the Libyan littoral, whose proximity to Crete made it one of the main destinations for refugee resettlement around the turn of the twentieth century. In the aftermath of the Cretan civil war of the late 1890s, at least 5,000 displaced islanders had been resettled in the greater Benghazi region.<sup>38</sup> In January 1909, during an early phase of Crete protests, the Italian consul in Tripoli detailed a rally with the islanders at the helm. It was led by H. Culchi [*sic*], an erstwhile employee in the Hania branch of Navigazione Generale Italiana, the leading Italian shipping company. The Arab inhabitants of Tripoli also attended the demonstration. A deputation, with Ottoman flags in hand, proceeded to the European consulates and submitted a note of protest. The document evoked the Islamic character of the island by remarking “all of its soil tinged with the blood of [our] ancestors.”<sup>39</sup>

Half a year later, in July 1909, a long article devoted primarily to publicizing the grim scenes of refugee resettlements in Libya appeared in *Siper-i Saika-i Hüriyyet* (Lightning Rod of Liberty) with the title “Cretan Refugees.”<sup>40</sup> The İstanbul newspaper, issued under the direction of Ahmed Cevad, who traced his roots to Crete, spotlighted the plight of Cretan refugees around Benghazi and Derna. It detailed the hardships caused by corrupt state officials’ embezzlement of the funds allocated to the displaced. Describing the current misery of Muslim Cretans as “the evil fruit of the depravity of the tyrannical [Hamidian] regime,” the article concluded on a hopeful note by assuring its readers of better times ahead. It maintained that the Crete question would be favorably resolved thanks to the effort of “all Ottomans, united

<sup>36</sup> “Girit ve Vilayat,” *Tanin*, 12 January 1909 (30 Kanunuevvel 1324).

<sup>37</sup> HHStA, PA XII, Liasse XXVIII, 297, August Kral to Aehrenthal, İzmir, 11 June 1910.

<sup>38</sup> In April 1900, the Italian vice-consul in Benghazi had informed his superior in Tripoli of the arrival of around 5,000 Cretans in the eastern Cyrenaica region of Libya. ASDMAE, 156, Mancinelli Scotti to Enrico Chicco, Benghazi, 30 April 1900.

<sup>39</sup> ASDMAE, 215, Giulio Pestalozza to Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tripoli, 16 January 1909.

<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, the article picked out the word “*mülteci*” over its much more common synonym “*muhacir*” during this period. Today, *mülteci* is the most widely used word in Turkish for refugee.

together, raising a brave howl of Crete or Death from deep in their hearts.”<sup>41</sup> This ardent remark that the anonymous author of the article specifically addressed to “[our] refugee brethren” constituted more than a mere rhetorical device. “Crete or Death” was indeed the rallying cry that epitomized a “protestscape” shaped by an island.

Speeches delivered in mass rallies throughout the Empire coalesced around several common themes such as the geopolitical value of Crete and the centrality of martyrdom and anti-Muslim violence in its history. Public speakers harangued the crowds on the importance of Crete’s commanding position in the Mediterranean and amplified its legacy of martyrdom. At the conclusion of rallies, petitions were telegraphed to various state departments in İstanbul that picked out the main features of speeches. One particular slogan, “Crete or Death,” proved ubiquitous among the words of protest, delivered verbally by orators and crowds, or telegraphically by the organizing committees of demonstrations, which often drew religiously and ethnically diverse masses.<sup>42</sup> “No force is strong enough to erase from our minds and hearts the patriotic rallying cry of ‘Crete or Death’ (*Ya Ölüm Ya Girit düstur-ı vatanperveranesi*),” the petitioners from İzmir exclaimed after a large demonstration in June 1910. The signatories from the Empire’s second-largest city included the mayor, the mufti, the chief rabbi, the deputy to the Greek Orthodox bishop, and the head of the Ottoman Navy League. Another petition sent from the nearby small town of Seferihisar mentioned that villagers from its environs had joined the townspeople in “raising the gallant cry (*ref-i avaze-i hamaset*) of ‘Crete or Death.’” About 100 miles south in the town of Menteşe, the crowds marched behind the *ulama*, “holding Ottoman flags and shouting the patriotic slogan (*terane-i vatanperverane*) ‘Crete or Death.’”<sup>43</sup>

Although not boasting as prominent a Cretan presence as İzmir or Tripoli, Salonica too resounded with the echoes of death. The French consul stationed in that principal port city of the Balkans reported that every conversation revolved around Crete. He added that the local press, Turkish-language titles in particular, discussed it at length, often through first-page articles. In an August 1909 dispatch to the embassy in İstanbul, the consul wrote about a protest rally in Salonica’s central Tenth of July Square that drew more than 10,000 people. The event was held on a Saturday, a sabbatical intermission to the busy rhythm of this predominantly Jewish city bustling with commercial and maritime activity.<sup>44</sup> After an introduction by the mayor İsmail Hakkı Bey, seven orators took turns to deliver ten-minute speeches in Turkish, Albanian, Bulgarian, Greek, Judeo-Spanish, Serbian, and Romanian, all declaring the resolve to defend the Empire’s inviolable rights over Crete “to the last drop of their blood.” With loud applause the audience responded to the speeches, whose multilingualism made a statement about the unity of the Ottoman peoples. Some among the crowd were heard repeating after the speakers the phrase “We are

<sup>41</sup> “Girit Mültecileri,” *Siper-i Saika-i Hürriyet*, 1 August 1909 (19 Temmuz 1325).

<sup>42</sup> A recent article (Şenşık 2022) discusses Crete protests in 1910 through the lens of history of emotions with a mention of the predominance of death-infused slogans in such events.

<sup>43</sup> BOA, HR.SYS. 512/2, 24 June 1910.

<sup>44</sup> Centre des archives diplomatiques (French Foreign Ministry Archives in Nantes; CADN), 166 PO/E/251, French Consul to Maurice Bompard (French Ambassador), Salonica, 8 August 1909.

prepared to die.” At the conclusion of the addresses, a young man read aloud various petitions that the inhabitants of nearby towns and villages telegraphed to express support.<sup>45</sup>

Saadi Lévy’s *Journal de Salonique* portrayed the rally enthusiastically. According to its front-page account, around 15,000 protesters had crowded the main square of Salonica where, for days on end, two words had resonated like a refrain in the hearts of its patriotic citizens: Crete and Death. An hour before the demonstration, waves of protesters had begun to stream into the main square, a huge space but not large enough to contain the thousands who proceeded there to hear the fiery words of orators. The crowd loudly applauded all the speeches, which occasioned the phrase “Crete or Death.” As if to communicate the clamor of that slogan, *Journal de Salonique* featured it in large bold fonts in three different paragraphs within the body of the text that covered the event.<sup>46</sup>

In less than a year, Salonica’s Tenth of July Square hosted another mass Crete protest in which various public figures delivered speeches in eight languages. The final address was given by Ismail Hakkı Efendi, a lawyer with Cretan roots, not to be confused with Ismail Hakkı Bey from the August 1909 protest in the same city. Haranguing the crowd in the name of all Muslim Cretans, Ismail Hakkı Efendi pronounced “in a rather sorrowful voice” the collective wish of “forty thousand persecuted Muslims in Crete”: the safeguarding of its ties to the Ottoman state, a message that the spectators received with a mix of applause and tears.<sup>47</sup>

At the height of Crete rallies in the spring of 1910, *Stamboul* pronounced on its front page that “at each intense phase of the Crete question, the provinces have been in a state of resolute agitation more so than the capital.”<sup>48</sup> Hundreds of protest petitions housed in the Ottoman State Archives provide evidence to the newspaper’s observation. A trove of documents bundled together under a single archival entry contains scores of petitions dated between 9 January 1910 and 2 June 1910, which were telegraphed from multiple provinces. The reason for arranging together a large number of petitions for this five-month interval seems to be their common response to a specific incident during the perplexing Crete crisis: the oath taking by the Christian deputies of the Cretan Assembly in the name of George I, the king of Greece. This defiant act by the island’s recalcitrant politicians suggested a clear gesture toward annexing the autonomous polity to Greece. A map that I prepared from this database of petitions includes 233 locations throughout the provinces where the Ottomans organized public meetings and gatherings over a period of five months in 1910 (see Figure 3).

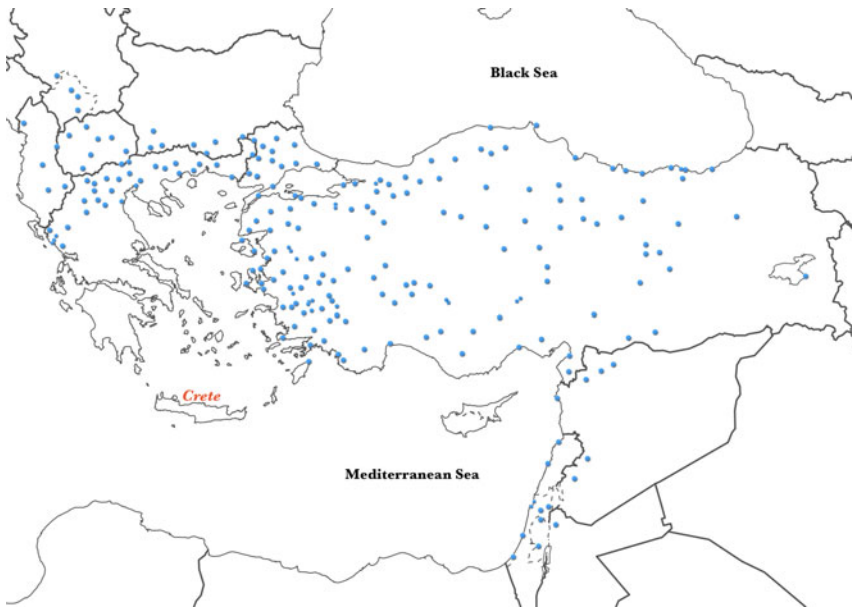
If a tightly knit group of middle-class Cretans in İstanbul proved instrumental in making Crete legible to the reading public through conferences and printed materials, lower-class islanders in several locations across the provinces became the embodiment of contentious politics in the late Empire. As mentioned before, the chief among such locales was İzmir with a population of Cretans exceeding 20,000 souls. In one of the multiple rallies that İzmir’s Cretan community organized in

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> “La Question Crétoise,” *Journal de Salonique*, 8 August 1909.

<sup>47</sup> “Girit İçin Taşralarda Mitingler,” *Tanin*, 16 May 1910 (4 Mayıs 1326).

<sup>48</sup> “Les Meetings de Protestations,” *Stamboul*, 14 May 1910.



**Figure 3.** Locations of Crete-related public gatherings and protest rallies between 9 January 1910 and 2 June 1910. Not seen on the map are the rallies in Tripoli, Medina, and Taif.

Source: Drawn from protest petitions housed in Ottoman State Archives, HR. SYS. 512/2

August 1909, the protesters held placards that read “Crete or [Our] Blood,” a phrase that the newspaper *Amaltheia* printed both in Turkish with Greek letters and in Greek translation.<sup>49</sup> This was a massive demonstration in which about 15,000 Cretans took part, according to the French consul’s report.<sup>50</sup> The coverage of this event by İzmir’s leading Greek Ottoman daily and the French diplomat indicates how the deracinated community of Cretans, a collective overwhelmingly constituted by popular classes, acted as the engine of protest in this major port city.

A month later, the Italian consul in Benghazi, another region with a conspicuous presence of displaced islanders, reported that about 600 Cretan refugees and 1,000 Arabs answered the call of the street crier for a rally organized by the local CUP branch. To the ears of the Italian consul the mix of native sounds issuing from the protest site was ominous if not cacophonous: “hundreds of vagabond and idle men and kids . . . performing their macabre dance (*danza macabra*), waving flags, uttering prayers, and chanting liturgical songs” in the fashion of Marabout celebrations. Also receiving special mention in the consul’s protest-phobic dispatch were the Cretans who lingered in the cafés late into the night, long after the rally dispersed, uttering spiteful words against Greece.<sup>51</sup>

All these examples demonstrate the activism of Cretan refugees in the protest rallies that enveloped the Empire after early 1909. Perhaps an even more noticeable form of

<sup>49</sup> “Syllalētērion,” *Amaltheia*, 3 August 1909.

<sup>50</sup> CADC, 153 CPCOM/75, French Consul to French Foreign Ministry, İzmir, 3 August 1909.

<sup>51</sup> ASDMAE, 215, Vincenzo Bernabei to Marquis Imperiali di Francavilla, Benghazi, 4 September 1909.



collective action that emerged in response to the Cretan crisis was the boycotting of Greece. Multiple acts of boycotting drew sustained attention of foreign observers for their disruptive impacts on the trade and commercial life in the Empire's urban centers. Although a detailed examination of the economic boycott is outside the scope of this article, it merits a brief mention in the context of İzmir to underscore the collective agency of the displaced Cretans in electrifying the urban space.<sup>52</sup>

In August 1909, the French consul in İzmir observed how the anti-Greece boycott disrupted the city's economic life. He picked out the lower-class islanders as the leading force of agitation in the boycott movement and provided a litany of their deeds to feature "Cretan emigrants (*Crétois émigrés*)" as a troublesome community with an "audacity truly unheard of." They would burst into stores, demanding the owners to sack Hellenic nationals on their payroll. The bands of Cretans from around the city would head to the harbor to prevent ships hoisting the Greek flag from unloading their cargo.<sup>53</sup> In June 1910, the Italian consul reported on the commotion produced by the forced closure of Hellenic stores in İzmir, which stemmed from coercion by "hordes of Muslims (*orde di musulmani*), mostly Cretans." In the narrative of the Italian diplomat, the main drivers of the boycott movement, both within İzmir and in its environs, were lower-class Muslims, especially those of Cretan background, pejoratively branded as "Muslim plebs" (*plebi musulmane*).<sup>54</sup> This was the primary topic of the Austro-Hungarian consul's correspondence with Vienna as well. He covered the situation with more details and enclosed in his report the entire issue of *İttihad* (Unity), a leading Turkish-language newspaper published in İzmir. The consul August Kral underscored the incitement of pro-CUP newspapers in the city, which produced an especially strong impression among "Cretan emigrants" (*kretensischen Auswanderern*). As for the implementation of the boycott at the street level, Kral corroborated the earlier observations by other European diplomats. He reported that the boycott against Hellenic shipping and stores was "initiated by fanatical Cretan gangs (*fanatisierte Kretenserbanden*) who traversed the bazaar and the adjacent neighborhoods, forcing all those businesses to shut down."<sup>55</sup> Attesting to the longevity of the boycott in İzmir, two years later the British consul echoed the remarks of his European counterparts. Speaking of many "undesirable" characters among the sizeable Cretan refugee community, the British diplomat regarded them as "a constant source of trouble" since the beginning of the Constitutional Revolution in July 1908: "They have been the leaders in all strikes connected with shipping, in all acts of violence connected with the Greek boycott."<sup>56</sup> All these examples suggest the pervasiveness of an official European perception of a lower-class Muslim refugee community as personification of fanaticism. Beyond indicating the protest-phobia and Orientalism of Western officials, the singling out of Cretans' active involvement in the protest movement and transgressive acts in the Ottoman urban space also implies that they were perceived to embody a cohesive social unit. In a way, the dispersal

<sup>52</sup> For a detailed examination of the boycott, see Peçe (2024).

<sup>53</sup> CADN, 166 PO/E/251, French Consul to French Ambassador, İzmir, 20 August 1909.

<sup>54</sup> ASDMAE, 216, Italian Consulate to Mayor des Planches, İzmir, 10 June 1910.

<sup>55</sup> HHSa, PA XII, Liasse XXVIII, 297, August Kral to Aehrenthal, İzmir, 11 June 1910.

<sup>56</sup> BNA, FO 195/2383, Henry Barnham to Gerard Lowther, İzmir, 10 November 1911.

caused by their displacement from Crete in the late 1890s morphed into cohesion by means of protest a decade later.

In his panoramic exploration of popular politics in the Middle East and North Africa from the late eighteenth century to the Arab uprisings of the 2010s, John Chalcraft (2016) underscores the presence of “unruly, transgressive and creative contentious politics.” The main engine of change in his survey is new social actors who “take political matters into their own hands, and, once they get organized, push forward a mobilizing project” (Chalcraft 2016, 7). In this section of the article I have identified the Cretan refugee community from underprivileged social classes as protagonists of the post-revolutionary contentious politics in the Empire. Both in mass rallies and, more so, in the acts of boycotting, they literally took political matters into their own hands through the example of occasionally unruly mobilization at the street level. Their oft-commented transgressive deeds targeted perceived economic interests of Greece in the Ottoman provincial urban space. In this manner, deracinated Cretans animated the abstract discourse of their fellow islanders who mostly operated in the lettered circles of the imperial capital. Among the new group of actors that began to populate the Ottoman public space in the wake of the Constitutional Revolution of 1908, this multi-class community of displaced Cretans navigated the field of collective politics, performing critical roles in the molding of its middle-class and popular spheres.

## Conclusion

In his work on mobility in Ottoman history, Reşat Kasaba (2009, 11) makes a memorably terse remark: “The Ottoman Empire began and ended with migration.” Kasaba elaborates on this characterization of the lifecycle of the Empire by underscoring the fundamental difference between the initial and the terminal migrations. While the former gave birth to the Empire, the latter spelled its passing. “The migrations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were, to a large extent, administered by states on the basis of their ideological priorities. For this reason the latter wave could only undermine the empire” (Kasaba 2009, 11–12). Kasaba’s insight is emblematic of the scholarship on late Ottoman displacements. A common feature of it is the examination of mass population movements within the narrative of the waning of the Empire. In one respect, this is natural given the fact that it was the military defeats in the Balkans that generated the greatest waves of forced migration into the shrinking Ottoman territories. While it is obvious that a series of wartime mobilizations produced mass displacement, it is also essential to recognize how the deracinated themselves mobilized the society at large during peacetime. Using a multi-class perspective, this article has explored the roles that the uprooted Cretans exercised in a modern protest movement, driven by an İstanbul-based network of middle-class literati and more numerous islanders from underprivileged backgrounds in the provinces. I make a pitch for studying displacement and protest in the late Empire as interwoven phenomena, instead of compartmentalized categories. In this regard, this piece contributes to the study of mass politics through a focus on an understudied refugee community that exerted an outsize impact. Conspicuous in the historiography of Ottoman displacements is a mainland bias produced by an overemphasis on émigrés and refugees traveling on railway tracks or on foot.

Peregrinations by sea, on relatively comfortable steamships for some and in the cramped steerage deck of ships for most, have received far less attention.<sup>57</sup> This article is also meant to serve as a reminder of the long history of the Mediterranean and its maritime routes in the cartographies of displacement.

The article has shown that the İstanbul-based Cretan network's activities mostly catered to similarly minded middle-class audiences through the press and conferences. Its messages, however, reached much larger and diverse segments of society in the Sultanahmed demonstration of early 1909. After this point, continual and organized mass protest became an ingrained practice in the Empire with an outpouring of rallies throughout the provinces in which Cretan refugees emerged as a conspicuous social group that animated the street politics. The magnitude of the Sultanahmed gathering was surpassed a decade later when better-known demonstrations for Turkish independence were held in the same location in 1919. Around that time in Damascus, Syrians too were raising the cry of independence. The streets of Damascus that rang with the outcry of "Crete or Death" after 1909 now transformed into sites filled with leaflets bearing the title "Independence or Death" (Gelvin 1998, 150–153). The core of this ubiquitous slogan, whose earlier version was chanted most vehemently by the Cretans, outlasted the Empire. In its post-imperial incarnation, desire for independence became the rallying cry that animated popular protest in a new world.

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<sup>57</sup> For a recent collected work in which several articles address displacement from Crete, see Adıyeke and Sepetçioğlu (2017).

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