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CONFLICT AND COLLABORATION: RETHINKING KURDISH-ARMENIAN RELATIONS IN THE HAMIDIAN PERIOD, 1876-1909 [1]

Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876-1909) has gone down in some histories as "the butcher," or "the red sultan." These titles were bestowed upon this Ottoman sultan in the mid-1890s, when widespread massacres of Armenian Ottomans bloodied large tracts of Anatolia; it was widely believed in European circles that the Sultan had ordered the murder of tens of thousands of his Armenian subjects. The not-so-honorific titles were accompanied by caricatures in the European press depicting a bloodthirsty, fanged Sultan slaughtering tiny babies with a butcher knife.[2] It was difficult for Ottoman officials to conceal from the numerous European observers in the region the extent of the massacres. A century of chances to examine historical sources confirms that they did indeed take place and claimed thousands of lives. What remains less transparent is the question of culpability. Whether the massacres were perpetrated at the behest of official orders or as a result of spontaneous outbursts of rage by local Muslims against their Armenian neighbors continues to be debated.[3]

The issue of culpability, however, has continued to plague any history of Armenians in the late Ottoman period. While the matter is certainly important, this paper seeks to set it aside for the moment, as its overwhelming dominance as the key question guiding these years has tended to obscure and derail attempts to understand other aspects of the violence that became widespread in Ottoman Anatolia at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.

The present study will instead examine broader facets of this violence by situating it within the larger context of Kurdish-Armenian relations in the Hamidian period. To the extent that this topic has been addressed at all, with few exceptions,[4]

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[1] This essay is presented in honor of a dear mentor, Professor Norman Itzkowitz, who has been devoted to understanding and solving ethnic conflict. A version of this paper was first presented at the Middle East Studies Association's annual meeting in 2002.

[2] Raymond H. Kévorkian and Paul B. Paboudjian, *Les Arméniens dans l'Empire Ottoman à la Veille du Génocide* (Paris: Les Editions d'Art et d'Histoire, 1992), esp. pp. 18, 48.

[3] Jelle Verheij, "'Les frères de terre et d'eau': Sur le rôle des Kurdes dans les massacres arméniens de 1894-1896," *Les Annales de l'autre Islam* 5, ed. Martin van Bruinessen. (Paris: ERISM, 1998).

[4] See, for example, Verheij, *ibid*., and Hamit Bozarslan, "Histoire des relations kurdo-arméniennes," and "La coercition et la violence au Kurdistan," in *Le Kurdistan et L'Europe:*

it too has generally been treated only insofar as it relates to the massacres of 1894-1896. Here, two prevalent voices have turned the histories of Kurds and Armenians in this period into "camps," each seeking to place or deflect the blame for the massacres, or to explain them away in a highly superficial manner. These two groups, the "Turkish" and "Armenian" voices (a third, "Kurdish," voice entered this debate relatively recently), have tended to turn any aspect of history in southeastern Anatolia, where Kurds and Armenians predominated during the Hamidian period, into a "question" whose answers, as Hamit Bozarslan has noted, are rife with clichés.[5] At stake is not simply the settlement of this historical episode of violence, but the continuing dispute over the Armenian genocide of 1915.

Writers from the "Armenian" camp tend to subsume much of late-Ottoman Armenian history into the larger genocide narrative in a manner that tends not to hunt for the causes of the massive violence, but rather to seek culpability. Although it is certainly a most pressing matter and deserves extensive treatment, making it the sole focus of scholarship limits understanding of the broader backdrop against which this violence took place. On the other side, for indeed there are two main "sides" to this issue, writers adopting the pro-state Turkish stance produce works that equally (if not to a greater degree) obscure this larger picture. Most of these scholarly efforts are devoted to deflecting blame for the massacres onto the allegedly disloyal and treasonous Armenians as a community and to denial of genocide. In extreme versions of this perspective, Armenians as victims are not discussed at all; the violence was perpetrated solely by the Armenians themselves, the only victims being Muslim.[6] The "Kurdish" perspective, which is small in body and falls rather silent between the other two, does not attempt to deflect blame from the Kurds for the violence of 1915.[7] A true understanding of the violence, however, does not appear to be on the primary agenda of this approach either; instead, Kurdish-Armenian violence is subsumed into a larger political story—how the Ottoman state played a divide-and-rule card to suppress and control its Kurdish population.[8] With these important historiographical considerations in mind, it is now in order to proceed.

The present study will tackle the topic of violence between the Kurdish and Armenian communities at the turn of the twentieth century. As opposed to simply seeking blame for the massacres, however, this paper will address factors in the violence that plagued the two communities during this period. Consular reports from

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Regards sur l'histoire kurde (19e-20e siècles), ed. Hans-Lukas Kieser (Zürich: Chronos, 1997).

[5] Hamit Bozarslan, "Histoire des relations kurdo-arméniennes," 151.

[6] I have discussed these approaches further in the introduction to my Ph.D. thesis, as they affect more arenas of history than simply those covered in the present study: Janet Klein, "Power in the Periphery: The Hamidiye Light Cavalry and the Struggle over Ottoman Kurdistan, 1890-1914" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2002), 13-14.

[7] Kamal Madhar Ahmad, *Kurdistan during the First World War* (London: Saqi Books, 1994), esp. Chapter 5: "The Kurds and the Armenian Bloodshed," pp. 145-183.

[8] For example, Osman Aytar, *Hamidiye Alaylarından Köy Koruculuğuna* (İstanbul: Medya Güneş Yayınları, 1992).

European archives, articles from the Kurdish and Ottoman press, travelogues, and other published sources in various languages reveal that this violence was not simply the result either of the Armenian revolutionary movement or of Ottoman orders to massacre the Armenians. Nor was it the consequence of an inherent antagonism between Christian and Muslim communities who could not coexist on peaceful terms. Rather, the willingness of certain Kurds to participate in the Sasun and other massacres can only be understood against the backdrop of larger social and political changes underway in the region. These changes included a transformation in the local power structure and an accompanying increase in the importance of land ownership. The land of not only Armenian, but also Kurdish, peasants was a target for appropriation by tribal chiefs and other notables, each seeking to expand his influence and wealth. Violence went hand-in-hand with the grab for land. The element of conflict that plagued the two communities must be viewed with these larger social and political factors in mind. At the same time, as the title of this paper indicates, conflict was accompanied by collaboration and cooperation. In other words, the totality of relations between Kurds and Armenians did not simply consist of strife, but also included cooperation and mutual assistance.

Kurds and Armenians in southeastern Anatolia lived under increasingly conflict-ridden conditions in the Hamidian period. Among the seemingly obvious reasons for strife, the Russo-Ottoman war of 1877-1878 and its aftermath amplified the sense of imminent ruin felt by many Ottoman Muslims. Having witnessed the loss of most of their European Christian territories over the course of the century, they now feared that one of the last areas in Ottoman Asia where Christians formed a significant part of the local population—Armenia—was about to be severed from the Empire. Because a relatively small number of Armenians had offered assistance to the Russians during the war and the British had put forth a program of reform following the war in 1879, many Ottomans saw both the Armenian aid and the British proposal as further steps toward an impending loss of this region.[9] The state was not the only party to view the Armenians with suspicion; many Kurds felt that the Armenians were working with the Russians to detach the region from the Empire. Meanwhile, Armenian nationalist activities, which had begun to blossom before the war, stepped up in pace. Revolutionary activities began in the 1880s and increased in the 1890s.

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[9] These concerns are reflected in numerous documents in the Ottoman Archives. For example, one document from 1893 discussed the Armenians' solicitation of outside help in their attempts to sever: "almost all the damages and losses suffered by the Glorious Ottoman State" as "enemies who are altogether looking for a favorable opportunity to snatch away to [sic] State's legal rights. It is crystal clear, that in most of the sporadic outbursts of insurgency, the seeds of sedition were either planted earlier by hostile states, or they strived their best for the perpetuation of seditious activity after its emergence." Mehmet Mansur, retired from the vice-presidency of the Council of State to Imperial General Secretariat, to be submitted to H.I.M. Memorandum. Feb. 26, 1893 [BBA: Carton 8, Section 14, Envelope 126, Document 298 (Armenian Question, Vol. 2, Document No. 14). In *Osmanlı Arşivi Yıldız Tasnifi: Ermeni Meselesi/Ottoman Archives Yıldız Collection: The Armenian Question* [hereafter referred to as *OAYC*] (İstanbul: the Historical Research Foundation, 1989), vol. 3, pp. 276-293.

These factors are commonly considered turning points in the history of Kurdish-Armenian relations (to the extent that the topic is treated at all). Although I agree that they were certainly significant, a more nuanced picture may be achieved by examining contemporary sources, including the various eyewitness accounts of European observers in their official and unofficial capacities, as well as Armenian memoirs and Kurdish literary productions. These sources confirm that relations between the two groups did begin to deteriorate around the time of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-1878, particularly in its aftermath, but they suggest additional factors were at work.

A number of sources tell us that relations between Kurds and their Christian neighbors were positive in many ways. One of the rare Kurdish sources, an account by Mela Mahmud Bayazidî, from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, discusses the symbiotic coexistence in which tribal Kurds and settled Christians would help each other with food and also mentions how, during the long winter months, they would spend their days and evenings together, singing and dancing.

In the winter, Kurds go in the mornings and afternoons to the residence of their *aghas* and sit for two or three hours telling stories and talking about battles… When mid-day arrives, they go home and eat… And their youth, boys and girls and brides, get together every winter evening at the home of [word unclear]. If there is a *saz*[10] present, they will play it. If there is no *saz*, the boys will sing and the young wives and girls will play [music] and dance together until dawn…. And if there are Christians in the *govend* [dance line] they will join the Kurds and dance and play [music] together.[11]

According to Bayazidî's account, during harsh winter months Christians would often host neighboring nomadic Kurds for the winter and would present a bill for their services in the spring. Or, sometimes the Kurds would feed the Christians in the winter, depending on which community had the greater surplus. In general, then, it was in the best interests of all communities, including both tribal and settled (*reaya*) Kurds,[12] to preserve this symbiotic coexistence and the benefits it brought.

European sources from the late 1870s and early 1880s reveal that the social and economic interaction, which was projected as being in the best interests of both communities, occurred in urban areas as well as in the tribal countryside. European consuls confirmed as late as 1879 that, in a number of towns, cordial relations between Muslims and Christians were key to the welfare of many. In Mardin, for example, where friendly relations between Christians and Muslims were the norm, the two communities lived in largely mixed neighborhoods and seemed to have evolved a system of interdependency, especially in commercial matters. There, the consul reported, several wealthy Muslims, rather than trade themselves, would hand

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[10] A *saz* is a stringed musical instrument with a long neck.

[11] Mela Mahmûd Bayazidî, *'Adat û rusûmatnameyê Ekradîye,* ed. and trans. into Russian [with Kurdish original] M.B. Rudenko (Moscow: Izd-vo vostochnoi lit-ry, 1963), 106-105 (note pagination is in reverse in this text; hence, p. 106 precedes p. 105).

[12] Bayazidî, 105-104. See below for more on settled Kurds' relations with neighboring Armenians.

over their capital to their Christian neighbors who would work their money for them and keep half the profits, giving the Muslims a direct interest in the well-being of the Christians.[13]

Also among peasants, there are many reports of mutual assistance in farming and agricultural practices, as well as aid during times of crisis. An Armenian village in the Bitlis district was reported by the British consul as having been saved from starvation by its Kurdish neighbors, who gave the villagers bread.[14] And in the Sasun region, which had been devastated by the massacres of 1894-1896, the Kurds found it in their own interest to assist the Armenians in resettling and to help them with cattle for plowing and seed for sowing.[15] In short, both communities wanted to prosper by tending their flocks and crops under peaceful conditions and trading them for a profit, and this aim could only be accomplished through reciprocal aid and good government.

The two groups not only pooled resources in acts of cooperation, but they also joined forces to protest bad government and to support just officials. In Erzurum, for example, Armenians and Muslims submitted a joint petition "[a]sking for the dismissal of corrupt officials and asking for the protection and retention of certain good officials who promote tranquility and good relations among the communities…"[16] The following year, both groups in Bayazid and Eleşgird submitted another such collective request after losing significant numbers to starvation, especially in Eleşgird, and banding together to seek famine relief.[17] In these cases, the two communities, far from having uncommon goals and aspirations, wanted the same things for themselves and their families and worked together to achieve them.[18]

What happened, then, to cause the massacres of 1894-1896, or at the very least, to draw the participation of Kurds in killing their Armenian neighbors? The overt conflict and the willingness of Kurds to take part in the massacres have been attributed to a brooding resentment against a community some viewed as traitors who posed a threat to the territorial integrity of the Empire. Ottomans had witnessed an increase in Armenian revolutionary activities, and the Armenian reform programs pushed by European powers only seemed to reinforce the notion that Armenians were attempting to end their loyalty to the Ottoman Empire and to take with them

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[13] Trotter to Malet. No. 20, Diarbekir, March 16, 1879 (FO 195/1211).
[14] Maunsell to O'Conor. No. 32. Van, July 17, 1899 (FO 424/199, FO 195/2063).
[15] Tyrrell to Townley. No. 54. Van, Dec. 27, 1904 (FO 195/2173).
[16] Petition of 53 Turks and Armenians of Erzurum to the vali of Erzurum, Kiği, Nov. 22, 1879 (FO 195/1237).
[17] Everett to Trotter. No. 13. Political. Erzurum, April 4, 1880 (FO 195/1316).
[18] By their very mention, these must have seemed like extraordinary events to the consuls, who were often tainted with the notion that the two groups were different and shared uncommon goals (a prejudice that seems to have been passed down to scholars). Yet their sources reveal that the two communities were very much like one another (at least for the settled communities) and cooperated, if not collaborated as the norm.

the lands of southeastern Anatolia, in which they mostly resided.[19] To these factors we might add a general sense of rivalry as many Kurds competed with their Armenian neighbors for the same lands. Thus, the famous rebellion led by Sheikh Ubeydullah in 1880 appears to have been a response to the widespread fears among Kurdish tribal chiefs about "Armenian ascendancy" in the region and the desire on the part of the Armenians to sever the region from the Empire.[20] Although Kurdish participation in the massacres of Armenians is well documented, the responsible parties did not represent the whole of Kurdish society, and the violence could not be characterized as a civil war. In fact, as we have seen from the examples above, much of Kurdish society was not at all at war with Armenian society and the two groups coexisted on largely peaceful terms before and after these violent episodes and sometimes even in the midst of them.

However, the matter of violence remains. This violence, of which the massacres of 1894-1896 represented an extreme case, was not the result of a primordial hatred between the two groups or simply the product of political, ethnic, or religious rivalries. Rather, it was linked to concrete social and economic changes underway in the region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Primary among these were the transformation of the local power structure and changes in the nature of land tenure and what came to be known as the land question, or, in European circles, as the "agrarian question."

Scholars working on other regions of the Ottoman Empire during the same period have begun to observe the trend of land grabbing, as, with the onset of agrarian capitalism, the value of land and land ownership took on new importance. Market shifts affecting the value of land were accompanied by nineteenth-century changes instigated by the Ottoman state in order to secure control over its dominions, particularly its peripheries, to promote agriculture, to ensure higher returns for its treasury, and also to settle nomads.[21] The Ottoman Land Code of 1858 introduced a new form of tenure based on lease holding on an empire-wide scale, although it was not formally promoted in Kurdistan until at least 1870 if at all.[22] One incentive the state offered to some nomads to settle was land, which was now becoming a valuable resource and one over which new disputes were created with

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[19] Never mind that the Europeans' reforms were urged partially to answer the violence that many Armenians already had suffered at the hands of some of their Kurdish neighbors.

[20] See Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism 1880-1925* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), pp. 1-7, and Wadie Jwaideh, "The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Its Origins and Development" (PhD diss., Syracuse University: 1960), esp. pp. 212-267. (Rebels actively sought the collaboration of some Christians as they rose against the government.)

[21] Samira Haj, "The problems of tribalism: the case of nineteenth-century Iraqi history," *Social History* 16:1 (January, 1994), 55.

[22] The British consul at Diyarbekir noted that this province did not see the Land Code applied officially until 1872, and in reality until 1878. He added that at the time of writing (1910) it had still not been applied in some parts (Matthews to Lowther. No. 50. Diyarbekir, Oct. 19, 1910 [FO 424/225]). See also Albertine Jwaideh, "Midhat Pasha and the Land System of Lower Iraq," in Albert Hourani, ed., *St. Antony's Papers Number 16: Middle Eastern Affairs*, Number 3, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1963), 112-13.

the new lease-holding system. As Samira Haj has noted for tribes in Mesopotamia, "the leading tribal houses adopted a land-grabbing strategy as they came to recognize that the new regime of power was to be founded on the direct control of the land and agricultural production."[23] When a number of Kurdish tribal chiefs likewise recognized these changes and entered the grab for land, the appropriation of peasants' land became a feature of life that contributed significantly to the level of violence in the larger region. Part of this longer process, the Armenian massacres of 1894-1896 certainly provided the context for the widespread appropriation of Armenian peasants' land by certain Kurdish chiefs.

The mass destruction of Armenians prompted the large-scale transfer of agricultural properties from Armenian peasants to Kurdish tribal chiefs, notably (although not uniquely) chieftains of the Hamidiye Light Cavalry, which was created to suppress Armenian revolutionary activities and to create a bond of loyalty between the Sultan and the Kurdish tribal population.[24] This was the case throughout the region, as the numerous consular reports from all parts of eastern Anatolia indicate for the years of the massacres. In Malatya, for example, land and crops belonging to Armenians were reportedly appropriated by Muslims of several villages, who openly declared that they would cease paying their debts to "infidels."[25] In Van, in the aftermath of the massacres, the British consul testified that most of the villages in Erciş had been occupied by Kurds after the inhabitants had fled their homes.[26] Foreign consuls later reported that after the massacres, "lands of emigrating and fugitive Armenians, being considered as 'mahlul' (unowned) [escheated] by the Department of Cadastre here, have been granted or sold to Moslems."[27] In the Harput (Ma'muretül-'Aziz) province, the local British agent pointed to the village of Ilic, where lands had been forcibly seized by Muslims after the violence broke out.[28] A letter from the Catholicos of Akhtamar to the Armenian patriarch at İstanbul shows how not only Armenian villages but even ecclesiastic establishments had been taken over in their entirety by Kurdish

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[23] Samira Haj, *The Making of Iraq, 1900-1963: Capital, Power and Ideology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 12.

[24] See Chapter 4 of my PhD thesis, "Power in the Periphery," for a more extensive treatment of the role of the Hamidiye Light Cavalry in the "Armenian" land question.

[25] Fontana to Herbert. No. 40. Harput, Aug. 17, 1896 (FO 195/1944).

[26] Williams to Currie. No. 10. Van, March 12, 1897 (FO 424/191, FO 195/1985). A table is appended to this report that provides information regarding the name of the village, the number of people killed in the village, the number of Christian families remaining, and remarks that illustrate who has occupied the villages. The table clearly shows a trend of occupation of Christian villages by Hamidiye Kurds. Unfortunately, however, the table fails to provide information for the period preceding the massacres; therefore, the precise extent to which the Christian population has decreased cannot be determined.

[27] Safrastian to McGregor. Bitlis, July 25, 1910 (FO 424/224). Parentheses in original, brackets added.

[28] Fontana to Currie. No. 30. Harput, June 15, 1897, and Fontana to Currie. No. 40. Harput, Aug. 31, 1897 (FO 424/192, FO 195/1981).

magnates ever since the creation of the Hamidiye Light Cavalry, though particularly during the massacres.[29]

Hüseyin Pasha, a powerful Hamidiye chieftain of the large Hayderan tribe, is a prime example of one who appears to have begun his career as a land grabber during these years. In 1895 Hüseyin Pasha's tribe was reportedly responsible for the complete plunder of the Armenians of Adilcevaz and some in Erciş as well.[30] In 1896, Hayderanî Hamidiye tribesmen extensively plundered several villages in the Ahlat district,[31] and after the massacres, Hüseyin Pasha and other Hamidiye chiefs even made away with the cattle that relief groups had sent for Armenians who had lost their livelihoods in the violence.[32] Close to a decade later, the Armenian *murakhas* [representative] of Adilcevaz reported in a letter, "In this Caza, Hussein Pasha, Chief of the Haideranli Ashiret and a Mir Alai of Hamidieh…ever since the year of the famous massacres, has seized, and taken possession of, the goods and revenues, the property and fields of the Armenians."[33] His remark indicates that although Hüseyin Pasha exploited the massacres to begin his grab for land, he continued to dispossess peasants for years afterwards.

Because usurpers such as Hüseyin Pasha counted on the fear of reoccurrence among the victimized population, in the aftermath of the massacres, even villagers whose lands had not been taken by force were pressed into signing them over to this Hayderanî *agha* and other Kurdish chieftains in exchange for protection. The British

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[29] Translation of letter from the Catholicos of Akhtamar to the Armenian Patriarch at İstanbul. Enclosed with Hallward to Graves. [No. 48?] Van, June 16, 1895 (FO 424/192). Writing a decade after the massacres, the French consul recalled the impact of the massacres on Armenian holdings in Van: "Before the massacres of 1896, Van's Armenians were prosperous and had almost all the wealth in their hands. There was good security, development of agriculture and industry and commerce. Peasants owned many flocks and cultivated their lands and relations between Armenians and Turks and Kurds was good, even fraternal. But the massacres of 1896 changed everything. The Armenians were dispossessed, most of their homes were burned, and wealth changed hands to the hands of the Kurds. During this time the Armenian population, especially of the countryside, was unable to recover." Enclosure in P. Calvière Acting Vice-Consul at Van, to Constans. No. 9. Van, April 2, 1906: Quarterly report (MAE Nantes, AA E/119). The government, however, officially refuted the Armenian patriarch's claims. In the *Sabah* of Nov. 4/16, 1895, it was written that nothing that the Hayderanî Hamidiyes had done had been contrary to the will of the Sultan, and that the patriarch's claims were untrue (Extract from the *Sabah* of Nov. 20, 1895. [FO 424/184]).

[30] Herbert to Marquess of Salisbury. No. 583. Telegraphic. İstanbul, Nov. 2, 1895 (FO 424/184); Hallward to Cumberbatch. [No. 79] Van, Nov. 6, 1895 (FO 424/184, FO 195/1983).

[31] Monahan to Currie. No. 61. Bitlis, Nov. 24, 1896 (FO 424/189, FO 195/1944).

[32] The British consul at Van reported in 1897 that in the village of Hersonk in Ahlat, 21 more relief oxen were stolen, 14 by the Hamidiye Süleyman Agha (of the Hasenan tribe) and 7 by a servant of Hüseyin Pasha (Hayderanî). He said that the Kurds had taken 113 of the 166 relief oxen granted (Crow to Currie. No. 35. Bitlis, Dec. 28, 1897 (FO 195/1981).

[33] Letter from the Armenian Murakhas of Adilcevaz, enclosed with Tyrrell to O'Conor, No. 48. Van, Oct. 11, 1904 (FO 424/206).

consul at Bitlis recalled several such instances, [34] and in 1897 a report had described the appropriation continuing in the villages of Ahlat and Bulanık districts, where in return for Kurdish protection, Christians were compelled to release documents attesting that they had "sold" their lands. While the practice may have afforded the villagers temporary protection, it was leading to the ultimate dispossession of all the Christian families in those locales.[35] In some cases, villagers had signed over their lands in an attempt to recover the moveable property they lost during the looting that accompanied the massacres, thinking their loss would not be permanent. But in many cases the transfer of these lands as well as adjacent gardens, to which usurpers had "no shadow of a legal claim," did indeed become legal, "not withstanding the opposition of the owners."[36]

In eastern Anatolia the new value placed on land ownership prompted many to try to seize what land they could. The opportunity to do so afforded by the massacres and their aftermath must be considered an essential factor for the Kurds' participation in the massacres. Of course, some Kurds believed that Armenians could not be trusted and that they were working to sever the region from the Empire, but many others were motivated by the opportunity to gain wealth.

Contrary to the popular view that violence was purely communal, looking at the history of land grabbing beyond the era of the massacres forces us to challenge theories that emphasize the ethnic/religious nature of regional violence. Indeed, numerous Muslim peasants were dispossessed of their land and property by Hüseyin Pasha and others like him. Many Alevis (members of a Shi`i Muslim sect found in today's Turkey and Syria) of Dersim, for example, were transformed into tenants in a manner similar to their Armenian neighbors. The French consul reported that in Varto:

> once the ruin of the [Armenians] was achieved, [the Hamidiye chiefs] turned their eyes to the Alevi villages. …A considerable number of gardens, pastures, and fields belonging to the Khormekli [Kurds] have been taken over by these Djibranli aghas. Those who were able to keep their possessions are only owners in name. In reality they have become the farms of their oppressors. The Khormekli Kurd today is as unfortunate and as mistreated as the Armenian of these parts. In fact, their situation is even more desperate than that of the Armenians, who from time to time find a way of obtaining justice.[37]

Hüseyin Pasha also seized the pastures of *reaya* Kurds in Van province,[38] and in 1906 it was reported that "Hussein Pasha has begun to appropriate the villages held

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[34] Monahan [to de Bunsen]. No. 15. Bitlis, Aug. 14, 1898 (FO 195/2021). Commenting on 1895.
[35] Crow to Currie. No. 35. Bitlis, Dec. 28, 1897 (FO 195/1981); Crow to Currie. No. 36. Bitlis, Dec. 28, 1897 (FO 424/195).
[36] Matthews to Lowther. No. 50. Diyarbekir, Oct. 19, 1910 (FO 195/2347), citing the example of the Başnik village in the Silvan district of the Diyarbekir province.
[37] Srabian to Constans. No. 76. Erzurum, June 7, 1906 (MAE Nantes, AA E/119).
[38] Satow to O'Conor. No. 13. Van, June 10, 1901 (FO 424/202, FO 195/2104).

by the Kurdish Aghas, and has declared war against the Ashiret tribes of Pelak Jelal, Zorvan, and Adam…."[39] Indeed, in a retrospective glance at the "agrarian question" the British consul remarked in 1911 that the Armenian land question was, in fact,

> not as prominent as the more difficult question of the settlement of claims of Raya Kurds who demand the restoration of the lands taken away from them by their Chiefs and Aghas. It appears that at the time of the formation of the Hamidie cavalry the power and influence of the Kurd chiefs and Aghas became greatly increased through the favour shown them by Abdul Hamid. These chiefs then began gradually to appropriate the land and property of the Raya Kurds and to reduce them to a state of serfdom.[40]

By the beginning of the twentieth century, then, a general trend of dispossession was becoming clear to observers. And by 1908, when the problem was codified as a "question," Hamidiye chieftains and other Kurdish notables had developed a full-blown system for acquiring resources and setting new heights for their influence. Among the fraudulent schemes usurpers devised over the years to dispossess peasants of their lands were fictitious sales, collusion with agents of the Ottoman Agricultural Bank, and after 1908, when peasants pressed for their claims, the manipulation of the legal system. Many times, these ploys were backed by intimidation and violence.

The usurpers' victims were largely Armenian, and, to a lesser extent, Kurdish peasants and members of weaker tribes. That Armenian revolutionaries were active gave those seeking to capitalize on the "Armenian question" pretexts to rob Armenians of their goods, but both Muslim and Christian peasants fell into deeper and deeper spirals of poverty, losing whatever goods or land they had left to Kurdish chiefs through force or extortion. While the Christian and Muslim peasants (and sometimes members of weaker tribes) were generally unable to protect themselves, the Armenians had the added disadvantage of being open to denunciation as traitors. Those who sought to take possession of their Armenian neighbors' property could gain custody of the goods by threatening to denounce the latter to the government or could simply claim, after taking the desired property, that the victim was a revolutionary.[41] Kurds were also accused by greedy neighbors of being traitors of some kind,[42] but the Armenian question was so potent and evocative that accusing

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[39] Report communicated by M. Hagopian respecting Ill-treatment of Armenian Prisoners at Van. (Translation.) Van, July 17 (o.s.), 1906 (FO 424/210).

[40] Notes on Journey from Van to Erzingan. By Molyneux-Seel [No. 5. Van, Feb. 6, 1911] (FO 424/226, FO 195/2375).

[41] As Captain Dickson noted, the Hamidiye, led by their officers, "make raids on the villages, ill-treat the people, take their cattle and sheep and crops, often killing an odd Armenian as well. These Kurds give as excuse for these raids—if excuse is needed—that the villagers are revolutionaries, or are harboring revolutionaries, the latter excuse being often true, though quite against the wish of the Armenians" ("Report on the Armenian Position in the Van Vilayet," enclosed with Dickson to Barclay, No. 4. Van, Sept. 24, 1906 [FO 424/210]).

[42] See Chapter 2 of my PhD thesis, "Power in the Periphery," esp. pp. 180-181.

an Armenian of being a revolutionary or even if being a sympathizer was a sure means to his downfall.[43]

Numerous Kurdish and Christian peasants became dispossessed of their properties and were reduced to tenancy or forced to emigrate as part of a historical process, not a conspiracy. There are indications, however, that some in the government wanted to perpetuate that process in order to strengthen the state's hold over the region by allowing nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes largely unfettered access to resources, including the land of settled peasants. The central Ottoman government thus was able to accomplish two key goals it had for bringing the region under tighter control. First was the permanent settlement of the nomads, sought sporadically from the first days of Ottoman rule over the area. Second, the government gained the support of powerful Kurdish chiefs who had threatened to take their people and flocks across the border to "greener" pastures, or who could easily be seduced by a better deal from Imperial Russia. The historical process ended up working out well for the government in terms of these goals, but there is little evidence that it was any kind of plot, at least in the broadest sense.[44]

Although Kurdish and other Muslim peasants as well as non-Armenian Christians were victims of the larger process of dispossession, when the Young Turk revolution ushered in a new era of freedom, it was the "Armenian agrarian question" that demanded attention. Armenian activists and their European advocates campaigned as vigorously for the return of lands seized from Armenians over the preceding decades that the "agrarian question" became a euphemism for the question of specifically Armenian lands. The non-Armenians who had lost their lands in a similar manner also pressed for their return after the restoration of the Ottoman Constitution in 1908,[45] but their voices were not heeded. The political leadership of the Armenians, by contrast, was now allied with the recently empowered Young Turks, and they had support in European diplomatic circles.

The story of "conflict" ends here for the moment, as the "agrarian question" after the end of Sultan Abdülhamid II's reign is beyond the scope of this study. As argued earlier, the general relationship between Kurds and Armenians was not inherently conflictual, and numerous anecdotes that surface in the literature illustrate cooperation, alliance, and even collaboration on some unexpected fronts.

The realm of politics was an important arena of collaboration, where a number of Armenian and Kurdish intellectuals worked together in opposition to Sultan

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[43] At the same time, it should also be considered that Kurdish peasants who were dispossessed of their lands had nobody to advocate on their behalf, while the Armenians found strong voices in Europe.

[44] Having said this, it is important to note that the government did perpetuate the process at times for its own ends. It was important to settle the nomads and particularly to disperse the Armenians, whom many high-ranking officials viewed as a threat to the territorial integrity of the empire. See Chapter 4 of my PhD thesis, "Power in the Periphery," for more on this point.

[45] A notice in the *Takvim-i Vekayi* (No. 88) of February 10, 1909 [29 Kânûn-i Evvel, 1324] shows that many such claims had been recently submitted in the İzmid district as well.

Abdülhamid II.[46] Kurdish intellectuals also submitted articles to Kurdish and Armenian journals decrying the violence as detrimental to both communities and urging their fellow Kurds to live on brotherly terms with their Armenian compatriots. Abdullah Cevdet, for one, blamed the Hamidiye for causing strife between Kurds and Armenians in an article, which appeared in *Droshak*, the official organ of the Dashnaktsutiun (the Armenian Revolutionary Federation). He wrote that Sultan Abdülhamid II had created the Hamidiye in order to achieve his goal of destroying the Armenians. Abdullah Cevdet maintained that the Sultan had spread rumors that the Armenians, in collusion with the Russians, were going to massacre the Kurds. By thus enlisting Kurdish support for attacking the Armenians in Sasun, the Sultan was able to "pave the way for an Armenian-Kurdish struggle."[47] In *Kurdistan*, the first Kurdish journal, other writers urged their readers to remember that even though there were a handful of Armenian "bandits," they were very few and not all Armenians backed the revolutionary program. The writer counseled his readers to behave well towards the Armenians, even to protect them, and to know that the real enemy was not the Armenians, but Sultan Abdülhamid II.[48] Similar words abound throughout the issues of *Kurdistan* (1898-1902).

These cautions against violence between the two communities took place within the larger backdrop of the Ottoman opposition movement against Sultan Abdülhamid II, which was an umbrella group uniting Kurds, Armenians and other Ottomans. Its participants blamed the Sultan for the massacres and other violence as well as for most problems Ottomans faced at the time. After the Sultan was overthrown in 1909, a number of Kurdish and Armenian intellectuals worked together to "right the wrongs" of the previous regime. They formed joint committees to deal with a number of issues--particularly the land question—and Kurdish leaders

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[46] See M. Şükrü Hanioğlu, *The Young Turks in Opposition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), for the larger opposition movement and the roles of various Ottoman groups in it.

[47] Bir Kürd, "Untitled?" *Droşak* (January, 1900), cited in Garo Sasuni, *Kürt Ulusal Hareketleri ve Ermeni-Kürt İlişkileri, 15. yy'dan Günümüze* (Stockholm: Orfeus, 1986), pp. 223-224. "Bir Kürd" was one of Abdullah Cevdet's pen names. Malmîsanij considers it possible that the article was actually submitted by Abdurrahman Bedir Khan, as the article was written in Kurdish, and Abdullah Cevdet was not able to (or never did) write in Kurdish. Hanioğlu, however, points out that in the early years of the twentieth century, Abdullah Cevdet was working on a Kurdish lexicon and so must have had some knowledge of Kurdish (personal communication). Because the article was also submitted to *Droshak* by the "editor of *Kurdistan*," Malmîsanij acknowledges that Abdurrahman Bedir Khan may simply have translated Abdullah Cevdet's submission (Malmîsanij, *Abdurrahman Bedir Khan ve İlk Kürt Gazetesi Kurdistan Sayı17 ve 18,* (Spånga, Sweden: Publishing house unknown [Sara Distribution], 1992), 15). Incidentally, contributors to Young Turk publications would submit articles to multiple publications, and editors would publish articles already published elsewhere with little concern for copyright issues.

[48] "Kürdlere," *Kurdistan* 25 (18 Eylül 1316/Oct. 1, 1900). Reprints of *Kurdistan*, the first Kurdish journal (1898-1902) have been published by M. Emin Bozarslan, 2 vols. (Uppsala: Weşanxana Deng, 1991).

were dispatched to various parts of the region to urge their compatriots to comply with efforts to return usurped lands.

Friendship and mutual assistance also continued on a daily level in numerous communities.[49] Even at the height of the conflict during the massacres, a number of Kurds had worked to save their Armenian neighbors and clients from the slaughter. These acts of compassion and aid may not be surprising if we recognize the humanity of the subjects of our study—a humanity which many scholarly works seem to strip from the actors they study, even if unintentionally. What is more unexpected is the Kurdish collaboration in Armenian revolutionary activity. There is a good deal of evidence that Hamidiye Kurds, organized in part for the very mission of suppressing Armenian revolutionary activities, would sometimes, in fact, help arm the "enemy" they were supposed to be fighting. For instance, some Hamidiye Kurds would sell Armenians the weapons which had been given to them by the state.[50] Similarly, in border areas, local Kurdish chiefs assisted revolutionaries in crossing the borders.[51] Meanwhile, Armenian and Kurdish peasants formed alliances to protect themselves from the rapacity of these same elites.[52]

These "anecdotes" suggest that cooperation and collaboration took place on several fronts and for various reasons. Some were the simple, normal, human acts of mutual assistance among neighbors who were part of the same community. Others

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[49] Numerous consular reports attest to this fact. See, for example, Fontana to Herbert. No. 35. Confidential. Harput, July 14, 1896 (FO 195/1944), and Tyrell to O'Conor. No. 23. Van, Oct. 7, 1902 (FO 424/203, FO 195/2125).

[50] Elliot to Currie. Private. Khoi, Iran. April 8, 1898. [FO 195/2021] See also Elliot to Currie. No. 18, Tabriz, May 5, 1898 [FO 195/2021; FO 424/196]). This was also reported by the French ambassador (Cambon to Hanotaux, Pera, July 19, 1897 (MAE Paris, CPC, Politique Intérieure Turquie, Vol. 73).

[51] Hratch Dasnabedian, *Histoire de la Fédération révolutionnaire arménienne, Dachnaktsoutioun, 1890-1924*, translated by Haroutiun Kurkjian, (Milan: Oemme Edizioni, 1988), 65. This is corroborated by Rouben, a former Armenian revolutionary, in his memoirs, in which he writes on several occasions about the hospitality and assistance they received from Kurds. He believed that many Kurds, who he claimed held powerful people, regardless of their religion, in high esteem, thus were drawn to the Armenian leader, Kevork. According to Rouben, *"torouns,* the *aghas*, and the *hamidieh* soldiers gathered around him to express their sympathies or simply to see this man who had defied the government for twenty years and was still alive." (*Mémoires d'un partisan arménien: fragments*, translated from the Armenian by Waık Ter-Minassian, (Provence: Editions de l'aube, 1990), 114-115, translation from the French). The revolutionaries also played into what they perceived as the Kurdish love for stories of combat and glory and because they sang their songs of heroic battles to impress the Kurds, many Kurdish songs also came to recount the deeds of the Armenian revolutionaries. The revolutionaries even forged some alliance with İbrahim Pasha, the formidable Hamidiye commander in the province of Diyarbekir, in order to secure, among other things, the migration of Armenian peasants to his districts (175).

[52] Safrastian to McGregor. Bitlis, April 6, 1910 (FO 195/2347); Lowther to Grey, No. 278, İstanbul, May 3, 1910 (FO 424/223); Rapport sur la situation politique du vilayet de Van pendant le 2ième trimestre. June 30, 1910 (MAE Nantes: AA E/45); and Safrastian to McGregor. Bitlis, April 22, 1910 (FO 424/223). See also Rouben, esp. pp. 125-127.

aimed to protect self-interest as many Kurdish chiefs viewed all their clients as a sort of personal property, to be worked but also to be protected. It thus was essential to the tribal chief's honor that he be able to protect all of his clients, regardless of their backgrounds. Still other collaborative acts would bring a profitable return, for there were warlords then as there are now. And finally, some assistance was provided out of awe and fear, which was inspired in both Kurds and Armenians by bandits of both stripes. In short, cooperative relations, whether friendly or businesslike, were conducted for many reasons, but ethnicity did not determine the totality of these relationships.

Just as cooperation was not guided by ethnicity, neither was conflict shaped solely by communal concerns. Following the Russo-Ottoman war of 1877-1878, relations between Kurds and Armenians *as communities* did deteriorate. As the preceding pages have demonstrated, however, conflict stemmed not only from political motives; it was not *just* at the behest of the state; and it was not simply a manifestation of primordial hatreds. Rather, a large part of the conflict took place over concrete issues, land being a key component in the struggle. Armenians were the primary targets because they had fewer protectors and could easily be denounced as traitors if they lodged a complaint against their aggressors. But Kurdish peasants and weaker tribespeople also fell victim to the same kind of violence, a fact that must be considered in this story of conflict.

The preceding analysis should allow historians to rethink some of the violence that occurred between Kurds and Armenians in the Hamidian period. By delving into the multifaceted nature of relations between these two communities, we do not explain away the massacres or the general violence, but rather do justice to their memory by attempting to understand them in all of their complexity.

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