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The Armenian Massacre of 1895 in Bitlis Town¹

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Abstract

This article explores the Bitlis massacre of 1895 and its aftermath with a particular focus on the role of local actors and Ottoman state elite in shaping the unfolding of this event. Through an in-depth examination of archival documents, it emphasizes the importance of local networks and dynamics in shaping the developments on the ground. Exploring the differences in the approaches of local and central Ottoman officials and political elites towards the treatment of the initiators of the massacre, the article reveals that there were explicit disputes among Ottoman authorities which were seemingly resolved after the Sultan Abdülhamid II imposed his will and ensured total impunity for the local perpetrators.

Keywords: Local powerholders; Mass violence; State-society relations; The Armenian question

Abstract in Kurmanji

Komkujiya Ermenîyan ya di sala 1895an ya li Bedlisê.

Ev gotar li ser sê nuqsaniyên sereke yê vekolînên mawcûd yê li ser Hizbilla hûr dibe ku, ew rêxistineke îslamî ye û di salên 90'î de li Tirkîyê di febliyetê de bû: kêmasiya dirokîkirina boçûna Hizbilla û endamên wê, kêmasiya lêfikirîna li ser rehenda mekanî ya belvabûna wê û tunebûna vekolînên bingeşên yê ku li ser wî tiştî bisekine ku were fêm kirin bê ev rêxistin di warê berêmi de çawa dixebitî. Gotar biyêrên li Farqîna Amedê qewimîne wek mînakê digre û repertuara kiryarên Hizbilla, yê di bin siya dewletê de bûn, lêpîrsîn û analîz dike. Wê beta çi radeyê li mekanên cûda, zora xwe dabû qebûl kirin, hedeşên wê çi bûn, û fêmkirina wê ya cihanê çawa bû? Ev xebat îddîa dike ku ev tîrbûn û xêdebûna şiddeta PKK-Hizbilla tê wê wateyê ku bi vê pevçûnê di diroka pevçûnê di navebera Kurdan de şêweyê pevçûnê ya bi temamî nû afirî.

Abstract in Sorani

Komellkuji ermenîyekani şaroçkey bitlis le salî 1895

Em nitare sernic dexate ser sê sinûrdari serekî ke le twêjînewekani êsta leser hizbulla hen, ke rêxirawekî îslamî ye le devey 1990 da le turkya çalak bû: kêmasî bedîrok kirdnî rêçkey hizbulla w endamekanî; kêmasî le leberçangirtnî rebendî cêgeyî billawbûnewey hizbulla we 'xîyabî twêjîneweyekî binerretî derbarey çonîyetî karkirdnî rêxirawekî le astî lokallîda. Be leberçangirtinî keystî sîlvan, ke şaroçkeyekî biçukî parêzgay diyarbekre, babeteke le kerestey karekanî hizbulla lesêberî dewletda dekolletene legell radey ew zoremilêkirdney le şwêne çiyawazekanda encamî dawê, amancekanî we tîrwanîni bo cihan. Perrawekî argumêntî ewe dekat ke degutrê tundrewî û çirî tundutîjî

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pekeke-hîzbullâ derbirrîne bo derketinî corêkî tewaw nîwêy mîlîlanêy nawxoy-kurd lenaw mêjûy mîlîlanêy dîrûdirêjî nawxoyî kurdîda.

Abstract in Zazaki

Qirkerdişê Armenîyan ê 1895î yê Şaristanê Bidlisî

Na meqale giranî dana bîrê kêmasîyanê bîngêyan ser ke no dem cigêrayîşê derheqê Hîzbullahî de, rêxistinêka Tirkîya ya îslamîste ke serranê 1990an de fealîyet kerdêne, estê: kêmbîyayîşê tarîxkerdişê raygebê Hîzbullah û endamanê ci, kêmbîyayîşê rehberê cayî yê vilabîyayîşê ci û kêmbîyayîşê cigêrayîşanê bibîngeyan derheqê gureyayîşê ci yê bêremî de. Bi nîmûneyê Sîlvanî, şaristanêkê qezaya Dîyarbekirî yo qij, na meqale repertuarê Hîzbullahî yê aksîyonî binê şîya dewlete de, dereceya îbarî ke Hîzbullah cayanê cîya-cîyayan de rêsto ci, bedefê Hîzbullahî û fehmkerdişê Hîzbullahî yê dinya, înan ser o cigêrayîş û analîz kena. Nuşte de munageşe beno ke zereyê tarîxê dergî yê lejanê mîyankurdîyan de ekstremî û giranîya şidetê PKK-Hîzbullahî kerd ke tewirêkê lejê mîyankurdî yê nîp-nene vejîyo meydan.

Introduction

In the years between 1894 and 1897, the Armenian population in different parts of the Ottoman Empire became the targets of mass violence. Among the atrocities committed in this period were mass murders, pillages, rapes, and abductions; around 100,000 Armenians were killed, and many more were uprooted. In the past, these massacres were predominantly discussed within a state-oriented framework that focused on the intent(s) of Sultan Abdülhamid II and on the motives and deeds of the Hamidian regiments. Recent scholarship, however, has focused on the variety of the perpetrators and their motivations, with the involvement and response of the authorities rendered by ‘thick’ description. Certainly, the massacres cannot be reduced to the outrages of Hamidian regiments, which were, by definition, state functionaries. Recent scholarship has also eschewed geographical generalisation, preferring to focus on particular locations or localities for in-depth study.³

Among the massacres of 1894-97, those that took place in the fall of 1895 were a little unusual in that they targeted both urban and rural Armenian populations and they unfolded sequentially, like a narrative, one after the other in apparently causal fashion, one seeming to prompt the next. In this article, therefore, I focus on the development and aftermath of a single massacre – namely, the one that occurred in Bitlis town and the villages around it – both to describe events and ascertain responsibility and also as a case study in this spatio-temporal context of narrative unfoldment.

Investigating this case of mass violence in its complexity, I first explore the ways in which it was shaped through the relations and negotiations of its main actors. Local and regional conditions and dynamics and their articulations are identified as crucial factors. I show that the Bitlis massacre was carried out by – with the active involvement of – a diverse group, including religious authorities, urban notables, and some Kurdish tribes. Religion did not only serve as a means of legitimation, since religious authorities were themselves at the forefront of violent mobilisation. Second, I reveal significant differences and conflicts among the central and local Ottoman authorities concerning what needed to be done about the local power holders in the aftermath of the massacre. Military and civilian authorities at the local level and

³ For the massacres, see Melson, 1982; Walker, 1990; and Kieser, 2005. For recent studies focusing on different localities, see Verheij, 2012, 2018; Miller, 2015; Polatel, 2016; Gölbaşı, 2018; Kurt, 2018; Mayersen, 2018; Sipahi, 2018; and Altıntaş, 2018.

local and state-appointed leaders were also at loggerheads because of their differences over the arrest of the leading perpetrators. In the end, it was Sultan Abdülhamid II and his unique position as sultan that determined the outcome, ensuring impunity.

The Historical Context

The nineteenth century was a period of great transformations for the Ottoman Empire, as well as for the Eastern provinces, like Bitlis.⁴ From the early nineteenth century, the central government started to curb the political power and autonomy of Kurdish *mir*s, the local leaders and landholders. By the last quarter of the century, the *mirlik* system, which involved the formal recognition of local autonomy, was gone. This process did not bring about the total replacement of local by central authority, however. Rather, there was a power vacuum created by the final abolition of *mirliks*, which was soon filled with the rise of alternative local powers, like religious authorities and then tribal leaders (Bruinessen, 1992; Ateş, 2013; Atmaca, 2019).

Local dynamics in the eastern provinces were also affected by fiscal and legal centralisation efforts. While pushing for an increased share of agricultural revenues through new measures and forms of taxation, the state did not try to abolish the *hafir* (protection money) practice, according to which non-Muslims were required to pay annual sums to local, Muslim power-holders. Thus, many Armenian peasants began to suffer double taxation.⁵ Further, while the Land Code of 1858 paved the way for the registration of *miri* lands in the names of peasants who cultivated them, many local Muslim power-holders in the eastern provinces were able to dispossess the smallholders – including Armenians – and register the lands under their own names (Astourian, 2011; Polatel, 2017).

Another important development of the mid-nineteenth century was the rise of Ottomanism. With the Tanzimat and Islahat Edicts, the Ottoman state took important steps towards recognising the formal equality of its male subjects, regardless of religion. Indeed, during this period, which continued until the consolidation of the Hamidian regime and its pan-Islamist policies, the official recognition of Muslim supremacy and dominance seemed to be ended. Some Muslims in different parts of the Empire were considerably disturbed by these developments, of course, which threatened their dominant positions (Davison, 1970; Akçam, 2007; Aksan, 2007).

In the 1860s and '70s, the Armenian Patriarchate submitted various petitions to the Porte concerning cases of oppression, humiliation, and land grabbing targeting Armenians, especially in the eastern provinces (Antaramian, 2020, pp.135-140). Despite the official commitment of the state to provide security of life, property, and honour for all Ottoman citizens on an equal basis, however, the central government did not adopt any measures to actually provide this security (Polatel, 2017, pp. 92-4). Then, the Russo-Ottoman War and ensuing Ottoman defeat introduced a new dynamic to the reform issue, since one of the conditions for Russian withdrawal from the occupied regions in the east was the adoption of a reform scheme that would improve the conditions of Armenians. Upon the involvement of Britain in the peace settlement negotiations, the Russo-Ottoman agreement was revised, but

⁴ Ottoman provinces in the nineteenth century were generally named after their urban centre, so, in this case, 'Bitlis' stood for both.

⁵ For the changes in the tax system and its impact on the 'Armenian Question', see Özbek (2012).

the Berlin Treaty of 1878 still obliged the Ottoman state to enact a reform program (Zürcher, 2004, p. 74).

Sultan Abdülhamid II had come to power in 1876, at the height of multiple nationalist uprisings in the Balkans. The political strategy that the new sultan began to implement after consolidating his rule was very different to that of Ottomanism, as he sought to create and base policy around a pan-Islamist bond with his Muslim subjects. Instead of merely dealing with local power-holders at the peripheries of the Empire, he attempted to ensure their loyalty by creating new institutions, like the tribal school and the Hamidian regiments (in 1891), which incorporated the local elite into the state in novel ways (Duguit, 1973; Deringil, 2000; Klein, 2011, pp. 20-51). The internationalisation of the Armenian question, non-implementation of reforms and continuing oppressions in the eastern provinces paved the way for the formation of Armenian revolutionary organisations in the 1880s. This political activism generated a significant degree of fear among the Ottoman ruling elite as well as among Muslim local power-holders (Libaridian, 2011; Suny, 2015).

In the first half of the 1890s, there were various incidents of violence against Armenians, especially in rural regions. There were some major events, like the Sasun massacre (Polatel, 2016, p. 179-98; Altıntaş, 2018, pp. 224-51; Miller, 2018, pp. 97-123). After this event, the reform issue once again entered the international diplomacy agenda. In May 1895, the Great Powers sent memoranda to the Porte to push for the implementation of reforms. On 30th September, the Hinchags organised a demonstration in Istanbul demanding the implementation of reforms. Clashes between the protesters and police were followed by attacks on the Armenian inhabitants of the city by Muslim mobs. Then, an Ottoman official in Trabzon was wounded by a gunfire. According to Ottoman authorities, the culprit was an Armenian, although the incident could also have been staged, according to British consular staff. Regardless, it was following this that a massacre targeting Armenians occurred in the city (Verheij, 2012, pp. 95-6). On 17 October, the Sultan accepted the reform scheme. The series of massacres that included the massacre in Bitlis town started after this development and continued until late-November.

In these massacres, Armenians and sometimes Syriacs in rural areas as well as in a number of urban centres – Erzincan, Gümüşhane, Bayburt, Diyarbakir, Harput, Erzurum, Sivas, Kayseri, Urfa and Antep – were targeted (Walker, 1990, pp. 156-64). The massacres generally started with a clear signal – like a gunshot fired on a Friday when Muslims had gathered in mosques for the Friday prayer. In all cases, there was a stark disparity between the number of Muslims and non-Muslims who lost their lives. This is apparent in the accounts of all kinds of actors, including those of Ottoman officials, British consular staff, Armenians and missionaries (Deringil, 2012, p. 214).⁶

One of the important questions concerning these massacres is related to responsibility and agency. In some earlier accounts, the massacres were considered to be ordered by the Sultan. As underlined by Deringil (*ibid.*), it is highly improbable that Abdülhamid II, who was a politically cautious leader, would have given any official instruction, but there is ample evidence that he provided support for the perpetrators by ensuring impunity. The timing and serial nature of these massacres and the fact that they went unpunished all goes to indicate that they were not incidental outbursts. On the other hand, studies focusing on different

⁶ For historiographies of the massacres, see Verheij (2012) and Gölbaşı (2015).

localities implicate a wide range of local actors – from sheikhs to urban notables, some of whom would later become members of the CUP elite – suggesting the importance of specific factors and local agency in accounting for each individual event.

An Overview of Actors and their Connections

There were a number of local actors involved in the massacre in Bitlis town and its aftermath. Among them were religious authorities affiliated with the Naqshibendi-Khalidi Order, like Hacı Tayyip from Muş and Sheikh Mehmed Emin.⁷ This order had spread widely in the eastern provinces during the 19th century. Hacı Tayyip, one of the successors (*halife*) to Salih Nehri, one of the most important leaders of the Khalidi Order, was a religious leader and a teacher with a considerable reputation (Çakır, 2017, p. 37). Sheikh Emin, one of the most important figures in the massacre, was a native of Şirvan, a district in Bitlis province. In various documents sent to the central government in November and December 1895, the acting-Governor, Ömer Bey, and the Commander emphasised that Sheikh Emin was a greedy person concerned about his material interests (*menfaatperest*), who had ridden to prominence through his connections to the Khalidi sheikh, Muhammed Küfrevi.⁸ At that point in history, Sheikh Küfrevi, a successor of Seyyid Taha of Hakkari/Nehri, was over 100 years-old and one of the highest religious authorities in the Ottoman East. Sheikh Emin was related to Sheikh Küfrevi by marriage – his sister Fatma was Küfrevi's wife. According to a letter written by an Armenian from the region, there was an increase in the number of outsiders in the town in the days before the massacre, including dervishes, mullahs, *fakhs*, and sheikhs (Hnchag, 1896). These people may well have been connected with the religious networks in which Sheikh Emin and Hacı Tayyip enjoyed significant influence.

Another group involved in the massacre comprised the local inhabitants, including some urban notables. One of these was Hacı Necmeddin, a prominent figure in the town and member of its administrative council. Necmeddin, who had a close relationship with Emin, had a personal group of brigands under whose protection he would travel. In the Hamidian period, he amassed a fortune by seizing the properties of Armenians – indeed, he was a person of limited means until the mid-1880s (Polatel, 2017, p. 236). Necmeddin had personal connections with the Mirza Bey family and Mirza Bey's son Musa Bey, the leaders of Kurdish groups in the region of Mutki and Huyt. Necmettin's wife was a daughter of Mirza Bey and a sister of Musa Bey, who was already infamous for his violence against Armenians (Cholet, 1892, p. 238; Kévonian, 2015). Apart from Hacı Necmeddin and his sons and helpers, a number of other local notables were also involved in mass violence in Bitlis town. These included the Mayor, Hacı Yasin, his son Yusuf, and İbrahim, another local official, who were all under the influence of Sheikh Emin.⁹

Another important group involved were tribal Kurds. Ottoman, Armenian, and British sources underline that there was a heavy presence of tribal Kurds in the town during the massacres and that they were involved in the atrocities. In reports sent to the central government by Ottoman officials, it was recognised that Hamidian and non-Hamidian tribes were killing and pillaging Armenians across the province. In the initial Ottoman reports, it

⁷ For the Khalidi order and its rise in Kurdistan, see Bruinessen, 1992, pp. 222-34.

⁸ *Başkanlık Osmanlı Arşivi* (Ottoman Archive of the Presidency, BOA): Y.PRK.UM 33/75, cipher telegram from Ömer, acting Governor of Bitlis and Şemsi Pasha, Commander of Eighth Division to the First Secretary of the Palace, 20 Teşrin-i Evvel 1311 [1st November, 1895].

⁹ BOA: Y.A.RES 77/62, telegram from Ömer, acting Governor of Bitlis, 3 Teşrin-i Sani 1311 [15th November, 1895].

was also stated that at the time of the massacre in Bitlis town, there was a large number of Kurds who had gone there for trade purposes.¹⁰ This external group was identified by the British vice-consul as comprising Kurds from Mutki – that is, Kurds affiliated with Musa Bey's family.¹¹ Kurds from Mutki and Huyt were also identified by Armenians as participants in attacks against Armenians in the Muş region (Troshag, 1896) and by the District Governor of Muş, Feham Bey.¹² Jelle Verheij's (2018, pp. 125-59) study on the massacres in Hizan and Şirvan (northern Bitlis) shows that Kurds from Mutki were also active in those massacres. Thus, we can see this group as a mobile force involved in cases of mass violence all across Bitlis, if not beyond. As noted by Toygun Altıntaş (2018, pp. 76-7), Emin was 'the greatest protector' of Musa Bey; the two men were so close that during the infamous Gülizar incident, Musa had placed the Armenian girl he had kidnapped to be kept at Emin's house.¹³

After this brief sketch of local actors and their inter-relations, we can turn to the connections between these and the central government. Urban notables involved in this event were already formally incorporated within the official apparatus because they held important positions in the local administrative structure. Sheikhs were not also a group alien to the state. Religious centres organised around *tekkes* functioned like socioeconomic compounds in the sense that the production of goods for sale was also a part of everyday life in these centres. Since the mid-nineteenth century, various Khalidi centres in the region had been exempted from taxes. The central government had also put sheikhs affiliated with such *tekkes* on a salary and provided periodical sums for the living expenses of their disciples and visitors (Kavak, 2013; Çakır, 2016). Specifically, Sultan Abdülhamid II had a close relationship with the Khalidi Sheikh Ahmed Ziyaeddin Gümüşhanevi, one of the most influential representatives of the Order in the capital (Özsaray, 2018, p. 503-504; Eyice, 1987, p. 484). When Khalidi Sheikh Küfrevi of Bitlis died in 1898, the Sultan ordered the construction of a tomb for him, sending Bitlis an Italian architect for this task (Çoruh, 2015, p. 149).

The Mutki and Huyt Kurds also had some connections to Istanbul. Mirza Bey's family was related by marriage to Bahri Pasha. A native of Muş, Bahri Pasha held a number of important public offices in the 1890s, serving as a District Governor in Istanbul, Governor of Harput, member of the Council of State, and then as the Governor of Adana (Demirel, 2016, pp. 208-9). During this period, Musa Bey, who had held various government posts in the region, was in exile in Medina because of various acts of violence committed upon his orders against Armenians and two American missionaries, George Knapp and Dr Reynolds, in the 1880s. Still, this particular family relation and links of similar nature might have given the Mirza Bey group, the leaders of a considerable Kurdish population in the Mutki and Huyt region, useful means of connection with central authorities. Thus, there were various connections among the local actor groups involved in this massacre, and among them and Istanbul. Bitlis was admittedly far from Istanbul, but it was not an isolated island.

Finally, an important actor involved in the unfolding of this case was acting Governor Ömer Bey, who was later appointed as Governor of Bitlis. A career bureaucrat, Ömer Bey had served

¹⁰ BOA: A.MKT.MHM 619/7, telegram from Ömer, acting Governor of Bitlis, 15 Teşrin-i Evvel 1311 [27 October 1895], and BOA: Y.MTV 130/97, cipher telegram from Şemsi Pasha, Commander of Eighth Division, 15 Teşrin-i Evvel 1311 [27 October 1895].

¹¹ The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA): FO 195/1887, Vice-Consul Hampson to Consul Cumberbatch, 28th October, 1895.

¹² BOA: DH.ŞFR 184/3, Feham, District Governor of Muş to Ministry of Interior, 1 Teşrin-i Sani 1311 [13th November, 1895].

¹³ See also Kévonian, 2015.

in various state agencies, including the Ministry of Finance. Before his appointment in Bitlis, he had also served briefly in the investigation commission tasked with investigating the Sasun Massacre.¹⁴

The Massacre in Bitlis Town

The summer of 1895 was a period of worry and anxiety for Christians in Bitlis. An incident that took place in a coffee house provides insights concerning the situation on the ground. In the beginning of July, a man named Halit threatened non-Muslims, claiming that the Christians would be ‘cut off’ in three days, starting with outsiders.¹⁵ Halit was briefly taken into custody but released shortly after. Around the same time, George Knapp wrote a letter to the British consulate reporting on some sort of growing Muslim society in the town.¹⁶ Knapp was worried because people associated with this society were vowing to shed blood if a reform scheme were to be accepted. British consular officials in other places, like Muş and Erzurum, also reported the formation of similar associations in their regions, noting again that these people were preparing for violent action and also that they were encouraged in this direction by various low-level officials and religious sheikhs.¹⁷ These notes sent before the outbreak of the massacres indicate a level of Muslim mobilisation across a broad region in the summer of 1895, including in Bitlis. An interesting point concerning this mobilisation is the timing. In his examination of the Harput massacre, Ali Sipahi (2018, pp. 71-2) shows that there were rumours of an oncoming massacre and a situation of underlying excitement in June-July 1895, with anxieties reaching a new height in October. In Bitlis, similarly, the massacre-threat incident took place in July but nothing happened until the end of October.

After the Istanbul Hnchag demonstration on 30th September, Hacı Tayyip, who was based in Muş, travelled to Bitlis. According to an account published in *Hnchag*, the official organ of the Hnchag party, he left Muş, visited various villages and Kurdish groups, gave them instructions, and then arrived in Bitlis (Hnchag, 1895). There, he held meetings with sheikhs and urban notables. According to this account, concrete plans for the Bitlis massacre were made at these meetings. A similar claim is found in a letter written by an Armenian eyewitness in the immediate aftermath of the Bitlis massacre (Troshag, 1896). This letter also identifies Hacı Tayyip as an organiser of the violence, noting that the objective of his Bitlis visit was to provoke people into massacring Armenians and pillaging their goods with the help of local sheikhs. The British vice-consul Charles Hampson in Muş also identified him as a ‘great source of danger’, a truly fanatical person with much influence among Muslims (House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, 1896b, p. 3). An important point here is that the complaints were not confined to the Bitlis case; Hacı Tayyip was also accused of provoking violence in other parts of the province, including Muş.

Before the massacre, there was a sense of panic among Bitlis Armenians. As in other places where such atrocities occurred, there was increased Muslim armament before the massacre, accompanied by gun searches and disarmaments by state forces targeting Armenians. Worried by the increased weaponry and open threats, Armenians from the town went to the Prelate,

¹⁴ BOA: İ.DH 1196/93597, Decree, 27 September 1306 [9th October 1890] and BEO: 561/42044, Sublime Porte to Ministry of Interior, 17 Kanun-ı Sani 1310 [29th January 1895].

¹⁵ TNA: FO 424/183, extract from private letter, 31st July, 1895.

¹⁶ TNA: FO 424/183, extract from private letter, 10th July, 1895.

¹⁷ TNA: FO 424/183, Vice-Consul Hampson to Consul Graves, 26th August, 1895, and Consul Graves to Sir P. Currie, 3rd September, 1895.

requesting him to meet with acting Governor Ömer Bey. On that Thursday, one day before the massacre, the Prelate met with the acting Governor and reported the anxiety as well as some of the deeds of Muslims that had caused them to panic. Ömer Bey told the Prelate that he had taken every precaution and showed him a telegram from the Sultan concerning the reform scheme. A disturbance was unexpected and impossible; he was personally responsible, even for the ‘feathers of a chicken’ belonging to Armenians (Hnchag, 1896). Upon this assurance, fears receded somewhat and around half of the Armenian bazaar folk decided to open their shops the following morning.¹⁸

The massacre in Bitlis town started around noon while Muslim men were in mosques for Friday prayer. It was reported that the number of Muslim men in the town was much higher than usual – ten times more, according to an Armenian who described the massacre (Hnchag, 1896). Observing the number of people circulating in the town and the extent to which people going to the mosque were armed as well as the fact that Muslims were locking up their shops before going to the mosque, Armenians in the bazaar began to hastily close their shops. Yusuf, son of Mayor Hacı Yasin, upbraided one of the Armenian shopkeepers. Two other Armenians witnessing this incident fled from their shops. As two police officers (*zaptiye*) were chasing them, Yusuf fired his gun.¹⁹ The massacre started after this. Armenians who could not flee or find shelter were killed by a number of Muslims flowing from mosques with the participation of soldiers and police officers. The violence then spread to the neighbourhoods. It is understood that the main killing continued for more than a day. In the later phase of the massacre, regular forces were on the ground but Armenians and missionaries were still besieged in their homes. Some Armenians who took shelter in two *hans* were evacuated after a couple of days and taken into custody with the claim that they had started the whole event.

According to Knapp and the District Governor of Muş, Feham Bey, the death toll was more than 500.²⁰ According to an account published in *Troshag*, the journal of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, 170 local merchants and shopkeepers, 300 artisans and craftsmen, and 380 others were killed (Troshag, 1896). There was a similar estimate in *Hnchag*, which noted the number of Armenians immediately killed on site as between 500 and 850. While 300 Armenians were identified and properly buried, the remaining bodies, it was claimed, were burnt by the government to make identification impossible. According to this account, many of these people were later buried in Turkish cemeteries (Hnchag, 1896). According to the missionaries in the town, to the best of their knowledge, just a single Muslim person was killed in the massacre.²¹ The joint assessment of six embassies regarding the death toll in the Bitlis town was around 800 people (House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, 1896a, p. 323). Two days after the start of the massacre, the acting governor reported that 38 Muslims and 139 Armenians were killed in the event.²² Later, the Ottoman authorities adjusted these numbers, lowering the total for Armenians to 136.²³ The lack of any kind of substantial attention to identifying the victims as well as the perpetrators points to the attitude of the government, that is, as directed towards sweeping things under the carpet. It is impossible to know the exact number of people who lost their lives in Bitlis. However, it is clear that there was

¹⁸ TNA: FO 424-184, Mr. Knapp to Vice-Consul Hampson, 6 November 1895.

¹⁹ TNA: FO 424-184, Mr. Knapp to Vice-Consul Hampson, 6th November, 1895.

²⁰ TNA: FO 424-184, Vice-Consul Hampson to Consul Cumberbatch, 29th October, 1895; and Mr. Knapp to Vice-Consul Hampson, 6 November 1895.

²¹ TNA: FO 424-184, Vice-Consul Hampson to Consul Cumberbatch, 3rd December, 1895.

²² BOA: A.MKT.MHM 619/7, telegram from Ömer, acting Governor of Bitlis, 15 Teşrin-i Evvel 1311 [27th October, 1895].

²³ BOA: Y.PRK.KOM 9/2, report by Sadeddin Pasha, İbrahim Bey and Cemal Bey, 3 Kanun-ı Sani 1311 [15th January, 1896]

tremendous violence, and a stark disparity in the numbers of Muslims and Armenians who were killed.

As noted, the intensely murderous period of the massacre in Bitlis town continued for more than a day. It is understood that after this initial phase, the event continued as pillage and violence of lesser intensity. More than a week after the massacre, Knapp reported that missionaries and Armenians were 'practically under siege'.²⁴ On 7th November, the Armenian Bishop reported that Armenians in the city were still unable to leave their homes.²⁵ The accounts of acting Governor Ömer Bey support the claim that the disorder in the centre continued for several days. On the 27th, two days after the outbreak of the massacre, he reported that efforts to stop the pillage were ongoing and that the local authorities were working to restore order.²⁶

The Aftermath of the Massacre

After the massacre, the Armenians were put under extreme pressure. Those placed in custody were forced to sign a document (*mazbata*) stating that they had attacked the mosque during the Friday prayer and were solely responsible for what happened. As noted by Edip Gölbaşı (2018, pp. 46-8), this was a common practice, used by the authorities after massacres in many places.

In his examination of the Harput massacre, which occurred a fortnight later, Ali Sipahi scrutinises the changes in the narrative constructions of this event over time. He emphasises that the Harput massacre was narrated as a Kurdish invasion by various actors during the massacre and its immediate aftermath and that Kurds disappeared from these accounts in the following months. In the Bitlis case, Armenian and British accounts written during or just after the massacres had recognised the participation of Kurds who were not townspeople in the massacre (Troshag, 1896).²⁷ The Kurds in these accounts were identified as having come from Huyt and Mutki, although they were not, in this case, presented as invaders. The presence of these Kurds and their engagement in widespread looting was also recognised in the reports of the acting Governor and the Commander in the region written two days after the start of the massacre.²⁸ According to these reports, the Kurds had carried out acts of pillage and theft, although they had just happened to be in town for trade purposes. In both the Bitlis and Harput cases, Kurds and the widespread pillage and theft linked to them had disappeared from the Ottoman state narrative by early 1896. In the report of the Commission written in January, there was no mention of outsiders.²⁹ The widespread pillage and theft reported by Ottoman authorities during the event was completely omitted from this later account and the whole issue of material damage was discussed in relation to fires started by Armenians.

²⁴ TNA: FO 424-184, Mr. Knapp to Vice-Consul Hampson, 6th November, 1895.

²⁵ BOA: A.MKT.MHM 619/15, Agob, Armenian Prelate of Bitlis to Secretariat of the Palace, 26 Teşrin-i Evvel 1311 [7th November, 1895].

²⁶ BOA: A.MKT.MHM 619/7, telegram from Ömer, acting Governor of Bitlis, 15 Teşrin-i Evvel 1311 [27th October, 1895].

²⁷ TNA: FO 424-184, Vice-Consul Hampson to Consul Cumberbatch, 29 October 1895 and Vice-Consul Hampson to Consul Cumberbatch, 6th November, 1895.

²⁸ BOA: A.MKT.MHM 619/7, telegram from Ömer, acting Governor of Bitlis, 15 Teşrin-i Evvel 1311 [27th October, 1895], and BOA: Y.MTV 130/97, cipher telegram from Şemsi Pasha, Commander of Eighth Division, 15 Teşrin-i Evvel 1311 [27th October, 1895].

²⁹ BOA: Y.PRK.KOM 9/2, report by Sadeddin Pasha, İbrahim Bey and Cemal Bey, 3 Kanun-ı Sani 1311 [15th January, 1896].

The development of the Ottoman narrative is also interesting in terms of the details of the Bitlis case. In the first report written by acting Governor Ömer Bey, the case was framed as self-defence on the part of Muslims – a framing that was common among Ottoman authorities. According to this account, Armenians had attacked unarmed Muslims in mosques and the Muslims had ‘defended themselves with stones, sticks, as well as the guns that they forcefully took from the hands of Armenians’. It was noted that this attack could have caused a ‘very grave incident’ had this not been prevented.³⁰

Two days later, a revised narrative appeared in which the attack on mosques was not mentioned. In this version, it was just noted that Armenians had attempted to revolt. The question of why they would revolt upon the acceptance of a reform scheme they were demanding was not considered. Apparently, Armenians had laid goods in their stores on the street to provoke local and outsider Kurds into pillage as a tactical ploy and then started fires in the bazaars. They had also spread the rumour that Muslim neighbourhoods were under attack in order to disperse the Muslims, who had run to their quarters, but nothing had happened there due to the intervention of authorities. In the meantime, the fires were also extinguished. While the security forces were in the Muslim neighbourhoods, some ‘excited’ tribespeople had stolen goods from a couple of Armenian and Muslim shops. This narrative was also repeated in the telegram of the military commander who wrote to the centre on the same day as the acting Governor.³¹ In both of these accounts, it was underscored that Armenians had achieved their objective concerning theft. In other words, they had managed to get their goods stolen. It is also noteworthy that these accounts made no mention of missionaries.

On 7th November, the Armenian Bishop wrote a note to the Patriarchate describing the massacre in Bitlis town and ongoing acts of massacre and pillage in the surrounding areas, stressing that Armenians were being forced into signing documents that they had caused the acts of murder and theft. According to the Bishop, a just commission could definitely find the initiators of this barbarity.³² In his response to the claims of the Bishop, acting Governor Ömer Bey slightly modified his narrative. In this third version, the Bishop himself was accused of having been one of the organisers of the alleged Armenian revolt. According to the acting Governor, the objective of the Armenians was to carry out a general massacre of Muslims, and those who attacked villagers around the town were also Armenians dressed as Kurds.³³ At this moment, Ottoman authorities were in frequent correspondence on the attacks made by Hamidian and non-Hamidian tribes in the province. A couple of days earlier, Ömer Bey himself had written to the Grand Vizier about the acts of murder and pillage carried out by these tribes in the province.³⁴ Thus, the refutation in the Bitlis case was not the result of a lack of knowledge or suspicion but an act of conscious manipulation.

Another account of the massacre was written by the investigating Commission on 15th January, 1896. In this last version, as well as the omission of outsider Kurds and acts of looting mentioned, there was a different actor composition. Now, the main culprit was the American

³⁰ BOA: Y.PRK.UM 33/13, cipher telegram from Ömer, acting Governor of Bitlis, 13 Teşrin-i Evvel 1311 [25th October, 1895].

³¹ BOA: Y.MTV 130/97, cipher telegram from Şemsi Pasha, Commander of Eighth Division, 15 Teşrin-i Evvel 1311 [27th October, 1895].

³² BOA: A.MKT.MHM 619/15, Agob, Armenian Prelate of Bitlis to Secretariat of the Palace, 26 Teşrin-i Evvel 1311 [7th November, 1895].

³³ BOA: A.MKT.MHM 619/15, cipher telegram from Ömer, acting Governor of Bitlis, 28 Teşrin-i Evvel 1311 [9th November, 1895].

³⁴ BOA: Y.A.HUS 338/87, telegram from Ömer, acting Governor of Bitlis, 19 Teşrin-i Evvel 1311 [31st October, 1895].

missionary in Bitlis, George Knapp, who had been completely absent from the earlier accounts of the Ottoman authorities. This time, the alleged Armenian revolutionary activity was presented as a much more organised effort, led by Knapp, and there was not a single transgression on the part of Muslims, who had just defended themselves.

Other correspondences among the Ottoman authorities tell a different story. In the accounts of both the Commander and acting Governor written two days after the outbreak of the massacre, it was written that they were ‘tending to the matter in a way that would not cause excitement on the part of tribes’.³⁵ Considering that not a single Muslim was taken into custody during or after the massacre, we can interpret this as a phrase by which the authorities on the ground were implying that they were covering it up. A couple of days later, they wrote a joint request to the centre.³⁶ In this telegram, they noted that while they were doing all they could to ‘ease the tension’³⁷, a man called Sheikh Emin was openly spreading words that were leading to excitement, transgressions and very grave incidents. They underlined that this man was saying that the blood of Armenians was waste (*heder*) and their property and honour was violable (*mühah*). Clearly, Sheikh Emin was issuing *fetwas* declaring Armenians *harbis* (people of war) and thus beyond the protection of Ottoman law. According to the acting Governor and the Commander, it was not appropriate for the authorities on the ground to take measures against him, but there was an urgent need to have him removed from Bitlis. Thus, they requested the central government to invite Emin to Istanbul under a pretence in order to prevent a ‘misunderstanding’ on the part of the people. It is striking that despite the fact that they were sure beyond doubt that Emin spreading such talk and abolished the rights of non-Muslims in Bitlis, the Commander and the acting Governor did not attempt to arrest him and just requested the central government to intervene.

In the days following the outbreak of the massacre, acting Governor Ömer Bey continued writing to the central government about Emin. On 4th November, he reported that Sheikh Küfrevi was not himself because of his old age. The acting Governor underlined that Emin had come to Bitlis from a village and rose to prominence because of his relationship to Sheikh Küfrevi. He had established an aura of divinity, and worked for his personal interests behind ‘the veil of sheikhdom’. Moreover, he was spreading the aforementioned incitements that would surely be dangerous. Based on this, Ömer Bey repeated his former request for Emin’s removal, emphasising the urgency of the matter.³⁸

On the 7th, the Grand Vizier informed the acting Governor that removing Emin from Bitlis was not an appropriate measure because it ‘would probably break the hearts of the Muslim population’. Acting Governor Ömer was ordered to politely explain the existing political situation to Emin. Could it be hoped that he would show good will towards such reports and advise and stop his conduct? Was his reported conduct ‘harmful taking the place and time’

³⁵ ‘aşayır ve kabailin galeyannı müeddi olamamak esbabıyla iştigal edildiği.’ BOA: A.MKT.MHM 619/7, telegram from Ömer, acting Governor of Bitlis, 15 Teşrin-i Evvel 1311 [27 October, 1895] and BOA: Y.MTV 130/97, cipher telegram from Şemsi Pasha, Commander of Eighth Division, 15 Teşrin-i Evvel 1311 [27th October 1895].

³⁶ BOA: Y.PRK.UM 33/75, cipher telegram from Ömer, acting Governor of Bitlis and Şemsi Pasha, Commander of Eighth Division to the First Secretary of the Palace, 20 Teşrin-i Evvel 1311 [1st November, 1895].

³⁷ ‘heyecanın ızale ve teskini ile geceli gündüzlü iştigal olunmakta.’ (Ibid).

³⁸ BOA: A.MKT.MHM 619/13, cipher telegram from Ömer, acting Governor of Bitlis, 23 Teşrin-i Evvel 1311 [4th November, 1895].

into consideration?³⁹ The acting Governor was ordered to consider these questions and report back immediately.

This order is most revealing. Despite the fact that Emin had publicly announced Armenians to be fair prey according to religious law and that the local authorities had insistently requested his removal from Bitlis to restore order, the central government behaved as if nothing had happened – as if Emin had not made public declarations against Ottoman laws, the Ottoman understanding of sharia and sultanic prerogatives during and after a massacre, moreover, in which hundreds of Ottoman subjects were killed. Emin's words were not significantly 'harmful' in the eyes of the government. The acting Governor and the Commander were merely ordered to *politely report* the situation to him and explore whether he would take their advice with good will. Clearly, his *fetwas* were not regarded by the central government as breaches of the law and the authority of the Sultan even though they appear to have been quite obviously incompatible with the basic norms of the rule of law. This strengthens the argument that the Porte essentially provided covert support for the perpetrators of the massacres more generally.

On 11th November, the acting Governor sent another telegram to the central government, reporting that he had politely informed Emin about the current political situation on numerous occasions but his ideas and conduct were unchanged and he was an absolute hindrance against the restoration of order and reform. On the previous day, a grave incident had almost occurred because of him, which was prevented at the last minute thanks to the measures of the Commander. According to the acting Governor, many Muslims in the town actually disliked Emin; therefore, his leave would not cause discontent but rather relief for the majority of them. On this basis, acting Governor Ömer repeated his request for Emin's removal from the city under some pretence. He would send Emin away with respect in such a way that no-one would think he had been 'removed'. Ömer Bey insisted that the well-being of the state and Bitlis required this measure.⁴⁰

The acting Governor waited four days for an order. On the 15th, he decided to send another telegram, which constitute the most explicit account given by Ömer. This time, he named three additional persons, all officials affiliated with the local government, as people sharing the same ideas as Emin. These were Mayor Hacı Yasin, his son Yusuf, who was also on the local administrative council, and another local official, named İbrahim. As mentioned before, it was Yusuf who had fired the signal shot that started the massacre. In his note, the acting Governor did not specify the details of their activities but noted that these four men were all 'interest-seeking' persons who continuously acted on their ideas that were against the sacred law (*bukuk-ı mukaddese*) of the Sultanate, and the honour and peace of Islam (*namus ve selamet-i İslamiyete mugayir*). They were preventing the lowering of tension, hindering the government investigation and prosecution related to the attempted rebellion, firing up the public and provoking and emboldening tribal people. Because the four men were so insistent on behaving in this way, the acting Governor thought that their behaviour could no longer be explained by personal interest alone. This, he argued, implied the extent to which they were

³⁹ BOA: A.MKT.MHM 619/13, cipher telegram from Grand Vizierate to the Province of Bitlis, 29 Teşrin-i Evvel 1311 [11th November, 1895].

⁴⁰ BOA: Y.A.RES 77/62, cipher telegram from Ömer, acting Governor of Bitlis, 30 Teşrin-i Evvel 1311 [11th November, 1895].

the servants and helpers of foreigners.⁴¹ Thus, their removal was an absolute and urgent necessity.⁴²

This document is exceptional in terms of its explicitness. Hundreds of people were massacred in the Bitlis town and the disturbance continued for weeks. The government, however, did not directly accept these facts, and in a telegram from the same period, acting Governor Ömer Bey openly refuted the claims of the Armenian Bishop, who had begged him to provide safety and ‘*aman*’ (Islamic protection that terminates *harbi* status). However, this telegram shows that Ömer was not comfortable with the situation, at least not with the extent and duration of violence. In his terms, what was going on was against the sacred law, and honour and peace of Islam. The judicial and administrative process was not working because of Sheikh Emin and some urban notables who were ‘intervening’. The acting Governor did not specify the form of this intervention or what he thought they were trying to do. However, taking the accounts of local Armenians and missionaries into consideration, it can be reasoned that the pressure put on Armenians from different groups to procure false evidence was primarily applied by these people, who had significant positions within the local government.

Five days later, the Commander sent the central government another telegram, which shows us that there were significant divergences of opinion between military and civil authorities on the ground.⁴³ In this telegram, the Commander stood by his earlier statement concerning Emin. He did not repeat the fetwa issue but confined himself to referring to his earlier correspondence, emphasising that Emin was putting the government in a difficult position. The Commander did not mention sacred or religious law. Apparently, his concern focused on the interests of the state as he understood them.

In this document, the Commander noted that Emin was a khalif of Sheikh Küfrevi and his brother-in-law, and ‘all unruly Kurds in the provinces of Van, Bitlis, Erzurum and Diyarbekir’ were his followers – in other words his flock. If he were forcefully removed from Bitlis, ‘a second excitement would take place’ (*ikinci bir heyecanın vukuu*), yet his presence in Bitlis also seemed inappropriate. Thus, he should have been invited to the capital on some pretence, under the guise of honorary promotion. This part of the Commander’s assessment was not so different from that of the acting Governor, but the alleged importance attributed to Emin is striking. The second part of his assessment is even more interesting. The Commander accepted that the remaining people reported by the acting Governor were of the ‘interest-seeking’ type. On the other hand, he argued that they had not carried out any specific abuses that would affect the investigation and prosecution. The last sentence of this telegram is also striking. The commander wrote, ‘In the name of truth and loyalty, I declare that the reasoning and activities on the basis of which the warning of the seat of the Governorate about them [the men in question] are built are clear to me.’⁴⁴ The Commander was certainly accusing the acting Governor and taking a firm stance to guard the men involved in the massacres, but what was clear to him is not clear to us.

In December, the central authorities discussed the requests of the acting Governor and the Commander. On the 3rd, the Commander-in-Chief wrote to the Grand Vizierate, noting that

⁴¹ ‘...*ecanibe hizmet ve muavenet derecelerini ima eder...*’

⁴² BOA: Y.A.RES 77/62, telegram from Ömer, acting Governor of Bitlis, 3 Teşrin-i Sani 1311 [15th November, 1895].

⁴³ BOA: Y.A.RES 77/62, cipher telegram from Ahmed Şemsi Pasha, Sekizinci Fırka Kumandanı, 8 Teşrin-i Sani 1311 [20th November, 1895].

⁴⁴ Ibid.

it was necessary to invite Emin to the capital in an appropriate manner because of the local situation.⁴⁵ On the 25th – so, almost a month later – the Grand Vizier submitted the decision of the Council of Ministers concerning the matter to the Sultan. Emin's case was separated from the three local officials (Mayor Hacı Yasin, Yusuf, and İbrahim), who were exonerated (it was noted that there was no need to punish them). The accounts and complaints of the acting Governor concerning Emin were omitted from the decision. It was just noted that the local Commander wanted Emin to be invited to Istanbul as a guest because he was causing difficulties for the operations of the government but his arrest might cause further tension in the region.⁴⁶ Thus, Emin's acts and discourse were not officially regarded as transgressions of law but as a managerial problem.

On 22nd December, the Commission headed by Sadeddin Pasha left Muş for Bitlis, purportedly to investigate the events. According to the British vice-council in Muş, the Commission had openly threatened Armenians there with 'extermination if they intrigued', and 'warned them against expecting foreign intervention'.⁴⁷ In Bitlis, the Prelate submitted a report to Sadeddin Pasha about the murders, pillage, forced conversions, and illegal arrests of Armenian notables. The Pasha's account of the meeting suggests that he practically interrogated the Prelate rather than gathering information and taking his complaints into consideration.⁴⁸ On the day of Sadeddin's arrival, Ömer Bey had reported to the centre that the 46 Armenians in custody were charged on the basis of their confessions with engagement in revolutionary activity and wounding with the intent to murder. According to the same report, the Armenian Prelate was also a revolutionary and a participant in the rebellion because he was found in the same place with those who had confessed their crimes. According to Ömer Bey, it would be against logic that the prelate was not one of them.⁴⁹ Thus, during his meeting with Sadeddin, the Prelate was also treated as a suspect.

A couple of days after the arrival of Sadeddin, the Grand Vizier sent a surprising order to the acting Governor. This order reflects the commands of Abdülhamid II – after the local state representatives, both civilian and military, had requested the removal of Emin from Bitlis. According to this order, the respect and obedience of Kurds to such sheikhs demanded no explanation; the majority of the Kurdish population in the eastern provinces were the followers of Sheikh Emin; thus, he could not be invited to Istanbul. Such a move would break people's hearts and lead to undesired incidents. Thus, Ömer Bey was to properly inform the Sheikh regarding the degree of the Ottoman government's faith and trust in people who possessed power and dignity like himself. Ömer was ordered to bring the Sheikh to the side of the government by giving him honours. This would ensure that the Sheikh would serve the state appropriately.⁵⁰ Instead of applying a measure like chastisement, which was deemed unsuitable in the context of the situation, the central government had decided to benefit from Emin's influence because this would not cause complaint by *any party* involved. Armenians or British consuls, it seems, were not even parties to be rhetorically taken into consideration. Just before this order was sent, the acting Governor Ömer Bey was appointed as Governor and

⁴⁵ BOA: Y.A.RES 77/62, Commander-in-chief to the Grand Vizierate, 21 Teşrin-i Sani 1311 [3rd December, 1895].

⁴⁶ BOA: Y.A.RES 77/62, Decision of Council of Ministers, 13 Kanun-Evvel 1311 [25th December, 1895].

⁴⁷ TNA: FO 424/184, Sir P. Currie to the Marquess of Salisbury, 24th December, 1895.

⁴⁸ BOA: Y.MTV 133/75, telegram from Sadeddin Pasha, 15 Kanun-ı Evvel 1311 [27th December, 1895].

⁴⁹ BOA: DH.ŞFR 186/32, cipher telegram from Ömer, acting Governor of Bitlis to the Ministry of Interior, 10 Kanun-ı Evvel 1311 [22nd December, 1895].

⁵⁰ BOA: A.MKT.MHM 619/13, Grand Vizierate to the Province of Bitlis, 20 Kanun-ı Evvel 1311 [1st January, 1896].

decorated with a very prestigious medal (Osmaniye 1st rank) (House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, 1896b, p. 16).

After this turn of events, Ömer Bey stopped sending telegrams about Emin or local notables. His remarks regarding the honour and peace of Islam or the sacred law of the Sultanate also became things of the past. He took an active part in the marginalisation and dishonourable discharge of Feham Pasha – the District Governor of Muş who had prevented the massacre there (House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, 1896b, p. 16). In the spring, American missionary Knapp was accused of organising an Armenian rebellion in Bitlis and briefly arrested. He temporarily left the region, although no official charges were brought against him. The Prelate was tried and sentenced to capital punishment. The top document in the official file concerning his case was the brief massacre account in which he had demanded *aman*. In line with the general amnesty regulations, his sentence was later reduced to 15 years imprisonment (Altıntaş, 2018, p. 297).

In the March of 1897, then Governor Ömer Bey wrote an interesting telegram to the central government. He explained that Sheikh Emin and a group of local notables, including Mayor Hacı Yasin and İbrahim along with Hacı Necmeddin and his larger household were corresponding with Kurdish tribes and other Kurdish peoples around Muş and other regions, and a man named Murad from Dagestan; together, they were fomenting a rebellion. He underlined that these people had illegally accumulated considerable power and wealth, by settling their armed men on the lands they had seized. This time, at another Friday noon, they had found some boars, set them free running towards the Bitlis town centre and firing weapons behind them to drive them into the people and cause pandemonium. According to the Governor, the ploy was thwarted, but it was necessary to immediately remove at least the most dangerous men in this group from the city for the sake of order.⁵¹ In the months that followed, the urban notables he complained about wrote several letters of complaint against Ömer Bey to the central government. After investigating the matter, the Council of Ministers decided to switch the placements of the Governors of Bitlis and Mamuretülaziz and to exile Hacı Necmeddin to Diyarbakir. In the summer of 1898, however, before this decision was implemented, Ömer Bey passed away.⁵²

Conclusion

This examination of the Bitlis massacre has shown that mass violence against Armenians in Bitlis was carried out with the active participation of a number of local actor groups who were linked to one another through various ways. In this case, urban notables, tribal Kurds, and some religious authorities were directly involved in the organisation and execution of the massacre. In fact, declarations and fetwas similar to that of Sheikh Emin were reported from across the region during the massacres. This study supports the view of the massacres as a related series of events. Emin was not an ordinary sheikh but one of the top religious authorities within the Khalidi order, renowned as the spiritual leader of the *majority* of Kurds in the Ottoman East. The words and actions of Hacı Tayyip and Sheikh Emin indicate that the role of local power holders in the unfolding of the massacres of 1894-97 should be clearly

⁵¹ BOA: DH.ŞFR 206/39, cipher telegram from Ömer, Governor of Bitlis to the Ministry of Interior, 19th March, 1313 [31st March, 1897].

⁵² BOA: DH.TMIK.M 33/29, telegram from Abdülhalim, son of Hacı Necmeddin, Bahri, son of Şemseddin, and Tevfik, son of Yasin; BOA: Y.A.RES 90/47, decision of the Council of Ministers, 3 Kanun-ı Evvel 1313 [15th December, 1897]; and BOA: BEO 1168/87552, Grand Vizierate to Commander-in-chief, 20th July 1314 [1st August, 1898].

acknowledged. However, this does not mean that all the massacres that took place in this period can be explained with reference to this particular religious network – because there were also massacres in regions like Sivas, Konya and Trabzon which were beyond Emin's zone of influence.

A number of factors seems to have played a role in shaping the context of the Bitlis massacre. Violent mobilisation on the basis of religious difference was clearly crucial. The resurgence of the reform issue which fed the fears of losing dominance among Muslims also seems to have played a role. Also important were material motives, explicitly attributed by the (then) acting Governor Ömer Bey to tribal Kurds who were involved in pillage during the massacre and to local notables who grabbed the lands of Armenian peasants after the massacre. Thus, there were multiple factors shaping the unfolding of this massacre.

This study has also revealed differences among the Ottoman authorities in the immediate aftermath of the massacres. Emin was seen as a trouble-maker both by the civilian and military authorities on the ground. However, their requests for his removal were dismissed by the Porte – despite the fact that military and civilian authorities in Istanbul, including the Commander-in-Chief and the *Council* of Ministers also supported the demands of local authorities. This does appear to show the extent to which Abdülhamid II imposed his will on the Ottoman bureaucracy during the massacres. He was the final decision-maker and his decision was to *reward* the Sheikh – despite the fact that he had declared the fundamental rights of Bitlis Armenians to be violable. This supports the argument that the Sultan's will and agency played an important role in shaping the context and outcomes of the massacres of 1894-97. What is unique about Bitlis is that the local initiators of this massacre were actually identified by the acting governor and commander, who began to fight over the right course of action that would be taken against them. Probably, Bitlis was not the only case where the massacre was covered up, but it may be the only case where the cover-up took place alongside explicit disputes among Ottoman authorities concerning the substance and implications of the sacred law of the Empire.

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