

# “The Armenian Question Is Finally Closed”: Mass Conversions of Armenians in Anatolia during the Hamidian Massacres of 1895–1897

SELIM DERINGIL

*History, Boğaziçi University, Istanbul*

In honor of Hrant Dink

## INTRODUCTION: ARMENIANS, KURDS, AND TURKS IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT<sup>1</sup>

Few issues in late-nineteenth-century Armenian/Turkish history straddle so many of the “questions” of the period as does the mass conversion of Armenians in the 1890s. The topic is enmeshed in the much-contested “Armenian Question,” the birth of Armenian nationalism, the so-called “Eastern Question,” and the rise of Turkish nationalism. This article will deal with these conversions by situating them within the larger context of the “Armenian Question” generally. Although important research has been done on the mass conversions during the genocide of 1915, surprisingly little has focused on the massacres of 1894–1897. Even more surprising is the lack of research to date into the issue of mass conversions during the latter period, and nothing has been written based on Ottoman archives.<sup>2</sup> My aim here is to make a contribution towards filling this lacuna.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank the following friends and colleagues for their many helpful critiques and suggestions: Taner Akçam, Ayhan Aktar, Ahmet Ersoy, Alev Deringil, Caroline Finkel, Nadir Özbek, Şemsa Özer, Asım Karaömerlioğlu, Cengiz Kırılı, Rober Koptaş, Yücel Terzibaşoğlu, Meltem Toksöz, and Gültekin Yıldız. I also thank the anonymous reviewers for *CSSH* for detailed and insightful comments. A previous version of this paper was presented as a talk at the American University of Beirut, and I wish to thank their History Department, and particularly Professor Abdurrahim Abu-Husayn, for inviting me.

<sup>1</sup> The quote in the title is from Abdülhamid II to British Ambassador Sir Philip Currie, cited in Roy Douglas, “Britain and the Armenian Question, 1894–7,” *The Historical Journal* 19 (1976): 113–33; quote p. 132.

<sup>2</sup> The most recent important contribution to Armenian history is: Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act. The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (New York, 2006). By the same author, ‘*Ermeni Meselesi Hallolunmuştur*’ *Osmanlı Belgelerine Göre Savaş Yıllarında Ermenilere*

The last real struggle for the very survival of the Ottoman state before the outbreak of the Balkan Wars and World War I occurred in Anatolia, which came to be seen as the last redoubt, particularly after the crushing losses of the 1877–1878 war against Russia. The Armenian Question also became a secondary theatre of confrontation between the Great Powers, particularly Britain and Russia, with Germany and France playing a secondary role. Britain, led by the Liberal giant Gladstone, took a close interest in the fate of the Ottoman Armenians, who were seen as “Christians in peril.” The Armenian massacres actually brought Gladstone out of retirement and enraged him to the point where he declared that Turkey “deserved to be wiped off the map.” One of the major influences on the fate of the Ottoman Armenians was the vexed question of “Armenian Reform” in the six *vilayets* (provinces), which became a sticking point between the sultan, his government, and the Powers, particularly the British. The Ottomans saw foreign interest in the reform issue as unacceptable interference in their internal affairs. The Sublime Porte also feared this was a first step in securing autonomy and perhaps eventual independence for the Armenian *vilayets*. A key source used in this article, in conjunction with Ottoman archival documents, is the consular correspondence of British consuls in the massacre zones, particularly that of Vice-Consul Fitzmaurice.<sup>3</sup> A major player in the region was Russia, often at odds with its own Armenian population in the Caucasus, and since the war of 1877 occupying the regions of Kars and Ardahan, adjacent to the Armenian *vilayets* of eastern Anatolia. In this way, the Armenian Question overlapped with the Great Game in Asia.<sup>4</sup> Germany became the closest ally of the Ottoman Empire during the reign of Abdülhamid (1876–1909), but unlike its role in 1915, it played a relatively minor part in the Armenian Question at this time.<sup>5</sup> France took an interest in the Armenian Question because she could not afford to leave the scene to Britain. Nonetheless, one of the major sources I use in this article, and set

---

*Yönelik Politikalar* (“The Armenian affair has been settled”: Policies directed at Armenians in the war years according to Ottoman documents) (Istanbul, 2008) is a remarkable contribution since it is the first such work based almost entirely on Ottoman archives. Raymond Kévorkian’s *Le Génocide des Arméniens* (Paris, 2007) is possibly the most solid and detailed work on the genocide to date. It makes extensive use of the Istanbul and Jerusalem Patriarchate archives.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Magnus, *Gladstone: A Biography* (London, 1963), 430. The best source on the reform issue is still Christopher J. Walker’s *Armenia: The Survival of a Nation* (London, 1991), 11–120.

<sup>4</sup> Ron Grigor Suny, *Looking toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History* (Bloomington, 1993). This is by far the best source so far on the fate of the Russian Armenians in Imperial Russia. On the history of modern-day Soviet Armenia, see Claire Mouradian, *L’Arménie* (Paris, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Lavinia Anderson, “Down in Turkey Far Away: Human Rights, the Armenian Massacres, and Orientalism in Wilhelmine Germany,” *The Journal of Modern History* 79 (2007): 80–111. This fascinating article details how the Zionist leader Theodor Herzl actually considered propagandizing for Abdülhamid in return for concessions in Palestine.

against Ottoman archival materials, is the correspondence of the French consul in Diyarbekir during the massacres, Gustave Meyrier.<sup>6</sup>

Another critical issue that provides the background for the massacres and the conversions was the rise of Turkish/Ottoman nationalism. Although it would be somewhat premature to talk about Turkish nationalism at this time, as it was understood after the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, there were clearly stirrings in that direction among Ottoman ruling circles from the late nineteenth century. The tenor of the memoirs of Hüseyin Nazım Paşa, minister of police during the turbulent 1890s, verges on racism. After the Zeytun uprising in 1895, Nazım Paşa is informed that among the documents captured from the Zeytun rebels is the correspondence of a certain “Little Hasan” (*Küçük Hasan*), who is mentioned as a Turkish official working for the Armenians and providing them vital information: “I was particularly distraught to the point of becoming ill by the thought that a Turk should become the tool of the committees who were thirsting for Turkish blood,” Nazım Paşa writes. “However, after a thorough investigation, we learned that the said person was actually an Armenian convert, and by posing as a Turk son of a Turk, had used the committee for his personal gain. In this way, in keeping with his nature, he killed two birds with one stone by aiding his people and filling his purse.”<sup>7</sup>

As will be seen, in the issue of official reluctance or unwillingness to crack down on the culprits of the massacres, there was a very real notion of “us” and “them”; the former being the Muslims, that is, Turks, Kurds, and others, the latter being the Armenians. This attitude later became prominent in the leadership of the Young Turks. Ahmed Rıza, “jotted the following in his private notebook. ‘Christians acquired privileges when they rebelled [and] they desired to rebel when they acquired privileges.’”<sup>8</sup>

What do we mean by mass religious conversion? When is conversion voluntary and when is it forced? According to Islamic law, conversion to Islam must be voluntary, and forced conversion is specifically banned.<sup>9</sup> After the Tanzimat reforms from 1839 onwards, specific regulations were put in place to ensure that any conversion to Islam would be carried out “according to established practice and regulations” (*usul ve nizamına tevfiken*). The conversion procedure was specifically designed to prove that the act was voluntary. It stipulated that converts should carry out the procedure in the presence of their next-of-kin and

<sup>6</sup> Gustave Meyrier, *Les Massacres de Diarbekir: Correspondance diplomatique du Vice-Consul de France*, Présentée et annotée par Claire Mouradian et Michel Durand-Meyrier (Paris, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Hüseyin Nazım Paşa, *Hatıralarım: Ermeni Olaylarının İçyüzü* (My memoirs: The inside story of the Armenian incidents) (Istanbul, 2003 [1924]), 258–59.

<sup>8</sup> Şükrü Hanioglu, *Preparation for a Revolution: The Young Turks, 1902–1908* (Oxford, 2001), 40.

<sup>9</sup> Selim Deringil “‘There Is No Compulsion in Religion’: Conversion and Apostasy in the Late Ottoman Empire, 1839–1856,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 40 (2000): 547–75.

witnesses from their community who would be given the opportunity to dissuade them. Converts were also required to be in complete control of their mental faculties and to have reached the age of discernment (*akil ve baliğ*). Also specified was that the highest-ranking religious authority of the convert's confession had to be present to bear witness that the conversion was voluntary; then and only then would the convert utter the sacred formula (*şahadet*) and be given a Muslim name. The new Muslim would also be issued a certificate from the local Islamic judge, the *kadı*, testifying that they had converted on such and such a date in the presence of witnesses. Only after this elaborate procedure had been carried out was the person recognized officially as a Muslim.<sup>10</sup> As will be seen, in none of the cases of mass conversions of Armenians during the massacres was this procedure carried out.

A related issue is that of apostasy from Islam. The commonly held belief is that the punishment for this is death. Closer study reveals a marked reluctance on the part of the authorities to apply the death penalty. Indeed, after 1844 Sultan Abdülmecid I (r. 1839–1861) banned the official execution of apostates. This was due partly to foreign pressure, but more to the realization that new times required new practices.<sup>11</sup> We will see that Armenians who took up Islam during the mass conversions often later returned to their original faith, depending on local conditions. But apostasy was still seen by the Muslim general population as a mortal sin, and many an Armenian was deterred from apostasy by a fear that his Muslim neighbors might well take the law into their own hands, as in fact often occurred.

The “six provinces” (*vilayet-i sitte*)—Sivas, Erzurum, Mamuretülaziz, Diyarbekir, Bitlis, and Van—where the great majority of the Ottoman Armenians lived, is the geographical setting for this article's story.<sup>12</sup> According to the documentation studied by this author, the geographical “climate for conversion” seems to have been most intense in the *vilayets* of Diyarbekir, Mamuretülaziz, and Sivas, although some of the most dramatic cases, such as the massacres and conversions that occurred at Urfa, lie beyond this geography.<sup>13</sup> The Armenian revolutionary organizations, the Dashnak and the Hunchak, had been working hard to enliven nationalist consciousness among the largely peasant population of these regions, with mixed success. Yet the Ottoman state—meaning Sultan Abdülhamid II, his bureaucracy, and the

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> The Ottoman administrative grid was a direct adaptation of the French *departements* of the Code Napoleon. It consisted of the *vilayet* (province), *kaza* (prefecture of sub district), *nahiye* (commune), and *köy* or *kar'a* (village). There were also districts organized as independent *sancak*. On the Ottoman administrative reform, see İlber Ortaylı, *Tanzimattan Sonra Mahalli İdareler* (Local administration after the Tanzimat) (Ankara, 1974).

<sup>13</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous CSSH reviewer for the suggestion of “the climate of conversion.”

Turkish/Kurdish elites in the six provinces—came to see the “Armenian Committees,” as they were called, as a real threat to their dominant position. Broadly speaking, this was the political and social context in which occurred the widespread massacres, mass conversions, and in some cases re-conversions of the region’s Armenian population.<sup>14</sup> Many Armenians converted to Islam in order to escape death; some later converted back to their former faith, some did not.

In almost all of the cases of mass conversion the explanation given by Ottoman officials was that the Armenians were converting because “they feared the Kurds.” Who were these Kurds and how did they come into the picture? Although I cannot do anything like justice to Kurdish/Ottoman history here, a brief explanation will contextualize what follows. The “Kurds” referred to are mostly the nomadic population of eastern Anatolia that had shared that geography with the Armenians for centuries. Although the Armenian peasant population had always been subject to a quasi-feudal oppression at the hands of the Kurdish *ağas* or *şeyhs* (tribal chieftains or headmen), what has been described as a “benign symbiosis” had nonetheless existed.<sup>15</sup> As Christopher Walker has elegantly phrased it, “Armenians and Kurds got on with one another tolerably, but not particularly well.”<sup>16</sup> Yet, some Armenians characterized their relationship with the nomadic Kurds as being that of “brothers of earth and water.”<sup>17</sup> Their Kurdish overlords had provided their Armenian peasantry with a modicum of protection in return for an unofficial “protection tax” the *hafir*. In the harsh winters of the Anatolian plateau, Kurdish nomads often shared the hearths of Armenians.<sup>18</sup> What set the two peoples against each other?<sup>19</sup> Several factors disrupted this precarious equilibrium. First, the effects of the centralizing reforms of the mid-nineteenth century only began to be felt in the six provinces in the 1870s.<sup>20</sup> Since the centralizing reforms, the Armenians of Anatolia had suffered from two main ills: double taxation and the depredations of the Kurdish tribes. Even after they had

<sup>14</sup> On the Armenian revolutionary organizations, the seminal works are still: Louise Nalbandian, *The Armenian Revolutionary Movement* (Berkeley, 1963); and Anahide Terminassian, *Nationalism and Socialism in the Armenian Revolutionary Movement* (Cambridge Mass., 1984).

<sup>15</sup> Suny, *Looking toward Ararat*, 101.

<sup>16</sup> Christopher Walker, *Armenia: The Survival of a Nation* (Chatham, Kent, 1991), 137. Walker is still the most detailed study on the massacres of the 1890s.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Martin Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London, 1992), 107.

<sup>19</sup> Nalbandian, *Armenian Revolutionary Movement*, 7. Nalbandian notes that on some occasions like the 1862 risings in Van and Zeytun, Armenian and Kurdish peasants had fought together against their oppressors.

<sup>20</sup> Janet Klein, *Power in the Periphery: The Hamidiye Light Cavalry and the Struggle over Ottoman Kurdistan*, Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2002, 116.

paid their taxes to the state, the Kurdish *şeyhs* of the area would demand further payment.<sup>21</sup>

The power of the big Kurdish lords, the *mir*, who controlled vast territories, was broken by policies of centralization in the second half of the century. By the 1880s the power of the last great warlord of the region, Bedirhan Bey, was broken, and intra-tribal feuding recommenced.<sup>22</sup> The breaking of warlords' power left a power vacuum in the region that was filled by "tribes which had hitherto been kept in check by the *mir*s."<sup>23</sup> From these tribes the Hamidiye Light Cavalry was recruited in the early 1890s. The Cavalry were lower-level tribes organized into Cossack-style irregular units by the Sultan Abdülhamid II and his entourage.<sup>24</sup> The official primary aim of these units was to quell what the state saw as "the perfidious and subversive activities of the Armenian brigands."<sup>25</sup> The Sultan's policy was to kill two birds with one stone—to cow the Armenian population and to secure the loyalty of the Kurds. In a manner of speaking, the Armenians were to be the bait for Kurdish obedience and loyalty: "By thus providing paid employment of high prestige and a virtual license to raid, the sultan hoped to install in the Kurds a strong loyalty to him personally."<sup>26</sup> These units featured prominently in the massacres and mass conversions of 1895–1897 organized and led by Zeki Paşa, who later became infamous as the author of the Sasun massacre.<sup>27</sup>

Yet there was another, deeper dimension to the Hamidian policy regarding Anatolia that has been described as the "politics of unity."<sup>28</sup> After the disastrous war of 1877–1878 with Russia, which led to the loss of the greater part of the most valuable remaining Ottoman lands in the Balkans, the sultan and his entourage feared that Anatolia, the last stronghold, would go the same way. An Ottoman document generated at this time clearly drew the parallel: "However, the Armenian affair is not like the Bulgarian or the Serbian affairs, because it has arisen in Anatolia which is the crucible of Ottoman power."<sup>29</sup> This had to be prevented at all costs. In order to fulfill this aim the Anatolian Kurdish population had to be wooed to the side of

<sup>21</sup> Vahakn Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus* (Providence, R.I. and Oxford, 1995), 114.

<sup>22</sup> Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, 181–82: "The denser the administrative network of the state became, the smaller and simpler the tribes."

<sup>23</sup> Klein, *Power in the Periphery*, 118.

<sup>24</sup> Selim Deringil, "Ottoman to Turk: Minority-Majority Relations in the Late Ottoman Empire," in Dru Gladney, ed., *Making Majorities: Constituting the Nation in Japan, China, Korea, Malaysia, Fiji, Turkey and the U.S.* (Stanford, 1998), 217–26.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>26</sup> Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, 186.

<sup>27</sup> On Zeki Paşa and the Hamidiye Regiments, see Deringil, "Ottoman to Turk," 222, 223; Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, 187; Klein, *Power in the Periphery*, 162.

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Duguid, "The Politics of Unity: Hamidian Policy in Eastern Anatolia," *Middle Eastern Studies* 9 (1973): 130–55.

<sup>29</sup> Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (Prime Ministry, Ottoman Archives, Istanbul [henceforth BOA]) Y.PRK. 32/94, 3 Sept. 1893.

what came to be considered as “official Islam.”<sup>30</sup> It must also be said that some of the conditions that the Powers were seeking to impose, such as the foreign approval for governors in the six provinces, a foreign “high commissioner” with extensive powers to oversee reforms, and a permanent “Commission of Control,” were entirely out of order for the ruler of a sovereign state.

Before we turn to discussion of the conversions themselves, some methodological considerations are in order concerning the language of Ottoman officialdom. Many of the reports, cipher telegrams, and memoranda used in this article were meant to be “in house,” destined only for the eyes of a limited number of officials.<sup>31</sup> Even so, Ottoman officialdom spoke elliptically and euphemistically, and it is precisely this wording that is invaluable as a window on the official mind. For instance Enis Paşa, the *vali* of Diyarbekir, always referred to Armenian women who Muslims had abducted and forced to convert to Islam during the massacres as “Armenian women who were dispersed here and there during the troubles” (*zaman-ı iğtişâda öteye beriye dağılmış olan Ermeni kadınları*), thus entirely removing the agency of the abductors.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, when Minister of Police Hüseyin Nazım Paşa referred to “classes of the population who intervened in the restoration of order” (*asayişin iadesinde müdahil olan sınıf-u ahali*), albeit as an undesirable event, he meant the massacring mob.<sup>33</sup> When the *vali* (governor) of Sivas reported, “Today some two thousand Kurds have killed twenty-three Armenians. Some five hundred Christians now want to convert to Islam of their own free will,” the bland and unquestioning use of “free will” strongly implies that conversion as a survival tactic came to be seen as “free will” by Ottoman officialdom.<sup>34</sup> Or when it is reported, “The many sticks that are being made in the carpentry and basket weaver shops in the city [Istanbul] should be confiscated and they should be forbidden to make more,” this can appear quite innocuous to the untrained eye. Innocuous, that is, until we look at the document’s date, 13 November 1896, only a few months after the Kum Kapı massacres of 26 August, when various sources reported that the massacring mob had borne similar sticks and cudgels, which some sources contend were issued by the police.<sup>35</sup> Ottoman

<sup>30</sup> Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Late Ottoman Empire 1876–1909* (Oxford and London, 2000), ch. 2.

<sup>31</sup> I should note that this is only a sample of documents dealing with the conversions of Armenians and other Christians during this period.

<sup>32</sup> BOA A.MKT MHM 637/16, 14 Mart. 1312/27 Mar. 1896, *vilayet* of Diyarbekir to Sublime Porte.

<sup>33</sup> Hüseyin Nazım Paşa, *Ermeni Olayları Tarihi* (The history of the Armenian events) (Ankara, 1998), vol. 1, 94, doc. 45. This is a two-volume compilation of documents selected with the aim of showing the alleged primary responsibility of the Armenian revolutionary committees in the outbreak of the “troubles.”

<sup>34</sup> BOA A.MKT 660/35 4, Teşrin-i Sani 1311/17 Nov. 1895, *vali* of Sivas Halil Paşa to Sublime Porte.

<sup>35</sup> BOA Y.A HUS 362/35 31, Teşrin-I Evvel 1316/13 Nov. 1896. On the motif of “uniform sticks,” see Edhem Eldem, “26 Ağustos 1896 ‘Banka Vak’ası’ ve 1896 ‘Ermeni Olayları’” (The Ottoman Bank incident of 26 August and the 1896 Armenian incidents), *Tarih ve Toplum* 5

officials in the provinces often told the sultan what they thought he wanted to hear, nor were they above downright lies.<sup>36</sup>

One of the most contested issues in the historiography on the massacres is the degree of responsibility that accrued to Sultan Abdülhamid II himself. Although it is highly unlikely that someone as politically prudent as he would issue a direct order for massacres, it is the view of this writer that there is substantial evidence, albeit circumstantial, that points in the direction of his benign neglect, if not actual covert support for the perpetrators of the massacres and forced conversions. As to the conversions and actual or potential re-conversions to Christianity, the official line was that the mass conversions of Armenians were not to be accepted but individual conversions were to be considered. As will be seen, this left the Armenian neophyte Muslims in a dangerous state of limbo, and open to the charge of potential apostasy. It is my considered opinion that this was not accidental or fortuitous.

#### THE HAMIDIAN MASSACRES AND MASS CONVERSIONS OF ARMENIANS

Particularly after the Sason massacre (18 August–10 September 1894), the 1895–1896 Zeytun uprising, and the various massacres that occurred in 1895–1896 in various localities, there is no doubt that the majority of the Ottoman Armenians in Anatolia lived in a state of terror.<sup>37</sup> Even in the documents published by the modern Turkish state, on the basis of the official papers of Minister of Police Hüseyin Nazım Paşa, the discrepancies in the number of the dead on both sides is a giveaway.<sup>38</sup> In the “troubles” at Trabzon on 13 September 1895, the Muslim dead numbered eleven whereas the Armenians lost 182.<sup>39</sup> In Erzurum on 23 October the ratio was five Muslim dead to fifty Armenians. In Bitlis, on 26 October, the toll is, Muslims 38 dead and 135 wounded, Armenians 132 dead and 40 wounded.<sup>40</sup> It is noteworthy that in almost all cases there are far more Armenian dead than wounded, suggesting a very unequal struggle. In Diyarbekir on 10 October, the Police Commissariat reported seventy Muslim dead and

(2007): 113–46. On 26 August 1896 a group of Armenian revolutionaries staged a raid on the Ottoman Bank in Istanbul hoping to attract the attention of the Great Powers to their cause. This event has been extensively covered in the literature. See for example, Christopher Walker, *Armenia*, 167, who refers to the mob bearing “clubs, similar, carefully shaped.”

<sup>36</sup> Abdülhamid Kırmızı, *Abdülhamid'in Valileri: Osmanlı Vilayet İdaresi, 1895–1908* (Abdülhamid's governors: Provincial administration in the Hamidian state) (Istanbul, 2007), 105–9.

<sup>37</sup> Dadrian, *History of the Armenian Genocide*, 113–31.

<sup>38</sup> The sheer discrepancy in the number of Muslim and Armenian dead could not be hidden even by those official documents carefully chosen to make the Turkish case that what happened was legitimate self-defense against Armenian “terrorism.” In this I follow the method used by Edhem Eldem in his, “26 Ağustos 1896 ‘Banka Vakası’ ve 1896 ‘Ermeni Olayları.’”

<sup>39</sup> Hüseyin Nazım Paşa, *Ermeni Olayları Tarihi*, vol. 1, 94.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 98–99.

eighty wounded against more than three hundred Armenians dead and one hundred wounded.<sup>41</sup> In Bayburt on 4 November, against eight dead and eleven wounded on the Muslim side, 170 Armenians died and thirty-five were wounded.<sup>42</sup>

Diyarbakir, where one of the worst massacres occurred on 2–5 November 1895, features largely in the documents on conversion. On 2 November the French Consul Gustave Meyrier telegraphed his Ambassador Paul Cambon, “The city is engulfed in fire and blood. Save us.”<sup>43</sup> On 10 November 1895, the governor, Enis Paşa, reported: “In some areas entire villages of Armenians have been converting and this is causing the *kaza* authorities to ask for instructions. As these conversions are not very convincing I humbly ask for instructions.”<sup>44</sup> The governor was referred to an *irade* (imperial order) dated 1 Teşrin-i Sani 1311 (14 November 1895), which established the official position: “[According to the *irade*] in order to avoid the misrepresentation of the conversion of the Armenians, if they apply again when order is restored, then their conversions can be processed according to the proper procedure. Until then the matter should be passed over with wise measures.”<sup>45</sup> This formula of “wise measures” is repeated throughout the documentation and in the context is clearly a euphemism for “palliative” or “temporary.”

The official position appears to have been as follows. If the mass conversions of the Armenians was accepted, this would appear to the outside world as an official policy of mass forced conversions. Also, the inter-communal tension created by the recent “disturbances” (*ığtışaşat*) had still not abated: “You are to bear in mind that to cause offence to one section of the population at a time when we are trying to win the hearts of the population will lead to untold complications.”<sup>46</sup> Presumably the “section of the population” that was being spared was the Muslims who would be offended by what they would perceive as insincere conversions.

In the wake of the general atmosphere of massacre and insecurity that reigned in Anatolia during this period, case after case of mass conversion was reported from the provinces. On 5 November 1895, the *vilayet* of Erzurum reported that in the last week three villages—Hınzırı, Korikul, and Humlar in the *kaza* of Tercan—had expressed the desire to “convert to Islam of their own free will.” However, the governor openly stated, “These

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>43</sup> Meyrier, *Les Massacres de Diarbakir*, 85 (my translation).

<sup>44</sup> BOA A.MKT MHM 636/25 29, Teşrin-i Evvel 1311/10 Nov. 1895, Governor of Diyarbakir Enis Paşa to Grand Vizier’s Office.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. The term used in all the official correspondence is “*tedabir-i hakimane ile işin geçiştirilmesi*.”

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. This last sentence in the draft memo was crossed out. These cancelled sentences in draft memos provide interesting insights into the official mind.

conversions are the result of fear of attacks and will not look good to friend and foe.” The Porte replied: “The said conversion of the Christian villages is due to a reason and that is their fear of the assaults of the Kurds. In this case you are to make clear that mass conversions are not permitted (*müctemian ihtidaların caiz olmadığı*). You are also instructed to defend them from attack and prevent undesirable events.”<sup>47</sup>

The formula of “not looking good to friend and foe” (*yar ve ağyara hoş görünmemek*) is an obvious reference to foreign consuls, missionaries, and the like. A few days later the *vilayet* of Sivas likewise reported the following: “Today some two thousand Kurds attacked the town of Divriği and started looting the goods of the Christians. So far twenty-three Armenians have been killed and some five hundred people, men and women, have applied by a petition through their village elders to become Muslim of their own free will and to become circumcised. If the Kurds do not listen to reason, it will be necessary to use armed force against them. . . . The conversion of five hundred people at once is likely to draw attention and this will not have good results just now.”<sup>48</sup> The reference to “drawing attention” and “not having good results just now” was, again, a clear reference to potential foreign observers. The answer by the Porte left no doubt about this: “You have reported that some five hundred people have applied to convert. For this to be accepted by the government would mean that it would be shown by subversive elements as the result of fear and as such it is not acceptable politically. You are to tell the applicants that their conversion can only be accepted after order has been restored.”<sup>49</sup> Sivas continued to be a flashpoint. Two days later the governor reported that in the town of Darende some two hundred Armenians had applied to convert to Islam and “were applying every day to the government offices.” They had been turned away according to official instructions.<sup>50</sup>

An observation is in order here. The reference to “people applying every day to have their conversions accepted” refers to the official conversion procedure in force in the Ottoman Empire at this time, as mentioned in the introduction. In times of extreme crisis, such as the massacres of the 1890s, an Armenian village that had offered to become Muslim, but had not yet been accepted, were in a dangerous state of limbo, making them even more of a target for

<sup>47</sup> BOA A.MKT MHM 638/32, 23 Teşrin-i Evvel 1311/5 Nov. 1895; 27, Teşrin-I Evvel 1311/9 Nov. 1895, Governor of Erzurum Rauf Paşa, reply by Special Commission of Ministers. Tercan is today a sub-prefecture of Erzincan province. Hınzırı (or Hınzoru) is today a village in Erzincan called Tanyeri/Pınarlıkaya. See, Nuri Akbayar, *Osmanlı Yer Adları Sözlüğü* (Dictionary of Ottoman place names).

<sup>48</sup> BOA A.MKT MHM 660/35 4, Teşrin-I Sani 1311/17 Nov. 1895, telegram from Governor of Sivas Halil Paşa to Grand Vezirate.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, Sublime Porte to *vilayet* of Sivas, 5, Teşrin-i Sani 1311/18 Nov. 1895.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, *vilayet* of Sivas to Sublime Porte, 7, Teşrin-i Sani 1311/20 Nov. 1895.

their enemies who could accuse them at any time of insincerity or, even worse, potential apostasy.

In some cases, out of desperation and in order to force the hand of the government, Armenians even declared that they had had themselves circumcised. On 12 November 1895, it was reported from the *vilayet* of Mamüretülaziz that the Armenians from the village of Perri had “performed their own circumcisions” (*kendü kendilerine hitanlarını icra eyledikleri*). Yet this was insufficient; the Porte replied: “This matter results from two reasons. One is the fear of the attacks of the Kurds, the other is to enable them at a later date to complain to the foreigners that they were converted by force. . . . They are to be told that if they still want to convert individually when order is restored the matter will be considered according to the proper procedure and precedent.”<sup>51</sup>

On 27 November the *vilayet* of Bitlis reported “all the men and women” in three villages attached to the *kaza* of Genc, Mezan, Erzif, and Tanimaveran, had applied to convert. The answer from Istanbul was almost copied verbatim from the telegram above: “The official acceptance of mass conversions by Armenians will cause this to be seen as forced conversion. . . . If they apply again when order has been restored, the matter will be considered according to proper procedure and precedent. Until then the matter should be passed over with wise measures as ordered in the Imperial *irade*.”<sup>52</sup>

In some cases the conversion issue arises in what seems to be quite mundane circumstances. On 27 December, the *mutasarrıf* (sub-district governor) of Dersim asked the following question: “What is to be done about people who were previously Armenian when they were fiancéed and now want to get married as Muslims?” The problem arose because the official refusal to recognize Armenian conversions was holding things up bureaucratically. A related issue was that neo-Muslim Armenians were demanding to be registered as Muslims, and as such, exempt from the military service tax, the *bedel-i askeri*. At this point, the issue of “voluntary” conversion being carried out “without any coercion, force or pressure” is stressed and repeated so many times (verbatim three times within two paragraphs) that it seems particularly suspicious. Particularly instructive is the reason given in support of how

<sup>51</sup> BOA A.MKT MHM 657/24 30, Teşrin-i Evvel 1311/12 Nov. 1895, Governor of Mamüretülaziz, Amiri to Sublime Porte; 31, Teşrin-i Evvel 1311/13 Nov. 1895, Sublime Porte to Governor of Mamüretülaziz. Mamüretülaziz is present-day Elazığ. Perri is the present-day *bucak* (district) of Akpazar. See Tahir Sezen, *Osmanlı Yer Adları* (Ottoman place names publication of the BOA).

<sup>52</sup> BOA A.MKT MHM 619/24, Deputy Governor of Bitlis Ömer Paşa to Sublime Porte; 14, Teşrin-i Sani 1311/27 Nov. 1895, Sublime Porte to Bitlis Province. Today Genc is a *kaza* of Bingöl. It is almost impossible to discern today just which villages are being referred to. Almost all have either had their names changed, been combined with other villages and given a new name, or have simply ceased to exist. Name changing has been official policy as part of the effort to wipe out the historical memory of non-Muslims inhabiting Anatolia. On this see Fuat Dündar, *İttihat ve Terakki'nin Müslümanları İskan Politikası 1913–1918* (The Committee of Union and Progress and its policy of Muslim resettlement) (Istanbul, 2001), 81–84.

“voluntary” these conversions were: “The fact that these conversions were carried out after the restoration of order and after their villages were hit by Kurds and the Kurds dispersed, shows that they converted only because they had found the true religion.”<sup>53</sup> Apparently, that fear of more Kurdish attacks might be a motive for conversion did not occur to the report’s author, who was just a bit too eager to stress that the Armenians had experienced a moral enlightenment.

Another case of dubious moral enlightenment is a petition presented by the Armenians of the *kaza* of Koyulhisar in Sivas, and it is worth quoting in total since it is a particularly poignant example of the plight of a desperate people:

We are Armenians from Koyulhisar and our lives and property have been spared thanks to our beloved Padişah. Fifteen days after the disturbances some of us, of our own accord, decided to accept Islam. Now the local government is insisting that we become Armenian again, but we did not convert out of fear or pressure. We saw that this was the true faith may Allah grant eternal life to our glorious Padişah, amen. Until now everybody was free to belong to any confession they wanted. Has this permission been revoked? If our Islam had been due to fear, all of us would have converted. But some of us have remained Armenians. Please for the sake of Allah and our sultan send us reliable officials who can investigate our behavior and what is in our hearts. They will see that we converted of our own free will and register us accordingly in the population and property registers. Because when we travel here and there our commercial papers and our identity papers state that we are Armenians, but in our hearts and our dress we are Muslims. This causes awkward questions. We are presenting this petition in Armenian because the Muslims will not write it for us. In short, may the state hang us if it pleases, we are willing and we will not turn our back on Islam (*Devletimiz bizi idam etsün irazıyız Müslümanlığımızdan vaz geçmeyiz*).<sup>54</sup>

The *vali* adopted a rather bleak view of the petition and pointed out that two women from the same area had recently gone back to Christianity “after firmly declaring for Islam.” He acknowledged the official order that “extreme care to be taken in the matter of conversions” and recommended that no action be taken “until the improvement of the weather,” when the petitioners could be summoned to Sivas for questioning.<sup>55</sup>

#### CONVERSIONS AS FALLOUT OF MASSACRE

In fact, most of the conversions that come up in the dispatches are reported *after* the ostensible restoration of order, or at least after the worst of the massacres were over. The *kaza* of Pütürge in Mamüretülaziz reported on 1 January,

<sup>53</sup> BOA A.MKT MHM 658/10 10 Receb 1313/27 Dec. 1895, *Vilayet* of Mamüretülaziz Secretariat, no. 409, forwarding copy of report from the *mutasarrıf* of Dersim, “*Mahza hidayet-i rabbani üzerine kabul-ü İslamiyet etmiş oldukları.*”

<sup>54</sup> BOA A.MKT 661/34 11 Mart 1312/24 Mar. 1896, *vilayet* of Sivas to Sublime Porte, encl., petition signed by eleven residents of Koyulhisar, Turkish written in Armenian characters. My thanks to Rober Koptaş for reading the original. Koyulhisar is today a *kaza* by the same name in the *vilayet* of Sivas. See *Osmanlı Yer Adları*.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 Nisan 1312/3 May 1896, *Vali* of Sivas, Halil Paşa to Sublime Porte.

“Some one hundred Armenian and Nestorians, men and women, from the Şirvan village of Amirdun have converted to Islam and, summoning circumcizers, performed their circumcisions.” Similarly, in the district (*nahiye*) of Kerker, and in the village of Keferdiz in Van and “several other villages,” Christians had converted and “renewed their marriages, performed their circumcisions, and it is heard that they are praying five times a day in places where there are mosques.” The report repeated that they were fully cognizant of the order to “avoid the official acceptance of mass conversions as this will imply fear of attacks by the Kurds,” yet pointed out that in none of the cases mentioned above had the Christians officially applied to have their status recognized; they were simply living as Muslims and the matter was only coming up because of bureaucratic hiccoughs like marriages, demands for exemption from the *bedel*, or cases like “two Armenians who were members of the *kaza* Administrative Council who are unable to perform their duties.” The *kaymakam* (prefect) of Pütürge, apparently quite a resourceful official, had taken it upon himself to carry out a secret investigation: “Through spies sent into their midst it has been ascertained that they do not intend to renege on Islam.” He indicated that in some areas all but a small minority had converted and that “because this *kaza* is inhabited by savage and nomadic Kurds and we do not have the necessary military force we are doing our best to keep order [we request urgent instructions].”<sup>56</sup>

Ostentatious religious observance, grown men arranging for their own circumcision, couples renewing their marriage vows; all seem to indicate conversion as a result of fear or at least severe pressure. The official’s reference to the “savage Kurds” in the area also points in this direction and the implication in the report is that the local forces were unable to secure the safety of the neophyte Muslims.

Reports of conversions continued to pour in. The governor of Mamüretülaziz wrote on 9 January, “During and after the recent troubles quite a few people singly and in groups presented and continue to present petitions to have their conversions recognized and to have their *bedel* cancelled. According to the present orders we have done our best to make them change their minds and to delay proceedings.”<sup>57</sup> The Armenian Patriarchate in Istanbul did not fail to protest to the authorities. In a communication dated 15 January the Patriarch declared: “[It has been reported that] fifteen Christian villages in the *nahiye* of Eğin in the province of Mamüretülaziz, as a result of the recent terrible events, fearing for their lives, have converted to Islam. They even became circumcised and converted their church, which had been looted, into a mosque. The signed

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 19 Kanun-u Evvel 1311/31 Dec. 1895, *vilayet* of Mamüretülaziz forwarding report from the *kaza* of Pütürge (today a municipality [*ilçe*] of the city of Malatya).

<sup>57</sup> BOA A.MKT MHM 658/10 23 Receb 1313/9 Jan. 1896, Governor of Mamüretülaziz Rauf Paşa to Sublime Porte.

declaration that was sent by the *müdür* of the place, to the effect that they accepted Islam of their own free will, was signed because they feared for their lives.” The Patriarch made it quite clear that there was nothing voluntary about these conversions: “In the said areas of Anatolia hitherto unseen oppression and cruelty, insults to Christianity, and efforts to convert Christians have been witnessed.” He declared that he had received this information in an official letter written to the Patriarchate. Nor was the worst over, even though the necessary orders had been sent: “The extraordinary fear and terror that the recent terrible events caused continues to reign and the victims still feel threatened.” The Patriarch demanded that the conditions be made propitious for the eventual return to Christianity of these people, “in keeping with the principle of the freedom of religion.”<sup>58</sup> The Porte duly asked the governor of Mamüretülaziz what was going on and asked why they had accepted the conversions in question. The province replied that the *kaymakam* of Eğin had indeed disregarded official instructions and had accepted the petition of the Armenians to convert, but there had been no coercion and that the statement about the church being converted to a mosque was false. The governor admitted, “Many Armenians had been applying singly or in groups and in fact getting themselves circumcised, and we have been obeying the official order to delay matters.”<sup>59</sup> The Patriarchate repeated its demands a month later: “Reports from the Armenian church Metropolitans (Marhasa) in the area continue to come in to the effect that many Armenians, laymen as well as priests, fearing for their lives in the recent terrible events, are showing themselves as Muslims. We demand that rapid and effective measures be taken which will guarantee their safety if they return to their own faith.”<sup>60</sup>

It seems that although the Porte issued orders that Armenian conversions were not to be accepted, some Ottoman officials had different views and did not hesitate to express them. On 15 January, the governor of Van, Şemseddin Paşa, reported that although, as per instructions, he had been turning down Armenian conversion applications, he now felt that, “because the Armenians here live in mixed villages with Kurds and therefore have a natural familiarity with Muslims, this inclines many of them naturally to convert to Islam.” He further noted that this was “causing great anxiety to the Armenian leaders,” and therefore he had accepted the recent applications for conversion of twenty-one Armenian men and women.<sup>61</sup> This was not looked upon favorably by Istanbul, however. A special commission of the Council of Ministers replied

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 29 Receb 1313/15 Jan. 1896, memo from the Patriarch of the Armenian *millet* Mağakya Ormanyan to Sublime Porte, no. 255.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 3 Kanun-u Sani 1311/16 Jan. 1896, cipher telegram from Sublime Porte to *vilayet* of Mamüretülaziz; 12 Kanun-u Sani 1312/25 Jan. 1896.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 10 Şubat 1312/23 Feb. 1896.

<sup>61</sup> BOA Y.A RES. 85/12 2 Şubat 1312/15 Feb. 1896, Governor of Van, Şemseddin Paşa to Yıldız Palace.

to the governor's telegram: "Although according to the principle of the freedom of religion, no objection can be made to individual conversions and their acceptance according to established practice and precedent, group conversions will lead our enemies to claim that the Muslims are converting the Christians by force."<sup>62</sup>

The claim by the governor that Armenians were "naturally inclined" to convert because they lived cheek by jowl with Kurds was clearly disingenuous, and served to camouflage that most Armenians who converted were doing so not out of some suddenly discovered affinity for their Muslim neighbors, but because they were afraid of them. Nonetheless, the reference to "the principle of the freedom of religion," both in the memo of the ministers and in the letter of the Armenian Patriarchate, is important because it shows that the idea of the Tanzimat period was at least kept alive as a polite fiction.

Indeed, that the Armenians of the area did not live in anything resembling peace and harmony is born out by the official correspondence. On 2 January the British Embassy complained to the Porte that they had heard that some seventy Armenians from the districts of Ispayrit and Hizan in Bitlis province had fled to the monastery on the island of Akhtamar on lake Van. The Embassy claimed that this was because they feared for their lives since they were the only survivors from thirty-three villages whose people had either been killed or forced to convert. The Embassy asked that they be permitted to remain in Akhdamar.<sup>63</sup> The governor of Van, Nazım Paşa, Şemseddin Paşa's predecessor, reported that the Katogigos of Van had asked for a guarantee of safe conduct for these people, who amounted to some one hundred and twenty souls. But he said their remaining in Van was not desirable, and they should be sent back to Bitlis, "because they are not of the people of this province." However, the governor admitted, "Although instructions to this effect were sent to the local authorities, it has not been possible to convince them to go back."<sup>64</sup> The matter did not end there. On 4 January the governor of Bitlis, Ömer Paşa, wrote a long telegram that is very important as an indicator of the official mind. The Paşa declared that the claim of the British Embassy was totally baseless and that, "the six thousand Armenians living in the *kaza* [of Hizan] continue to live there according to their religion and in all security." He asserted that the problem in the area was "entirely the work of a famous Armenian subversive," a certain Dilboş. Ömer Paşa declared that Dilboş did not hesitate to attack and kill Muslim and Christian without distinction, and

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 13 Ramazan 1314/3 Şubat 1312/16 Feb. 1896, minutes of meeting of Special Commission of the Council of Ministers.

<sup>63</sup> BOA A.MKT MHM 619/35 20 Kanun-u Evvel 1311, 20 Kanun-u Evvel 1311/2 Jan. 1896, trans. of memo of British Embassy. Ispayrit is today the village of Sürücüler in the *vilayet* of Bitlis. Hizan is today the *kaza* of Aşağıkarakası in Bitlis. See, *Osmanlı Yer Ađları*.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 21 Kanun-u Evvel 1311/3 Jan. 1896, cipher telegram from Governor of Van to the Sublime Porte.

that the Armenians attempting to flee to Akhtamar were in fact fleeing Dilboş. “Otherwise there is no reason for good Muslims living in this area since centuries, in peace and harmony with Christians who always freely practiced their religion, to suddenly start behaving in a manner so reprehensible to our August Master.”<sup>65</sup> After providing a classic example of blaming the victims, the governor went on to declare: “If the claim of the British Embassy [that people were being converted by force] were true this would not be confined to sixty or so Armenians out of a population of some six thousand and it would not have been possible for some sixty Armenians to get past so many Kurds who are in the area and escape to Akhdamar.” Thus, the governor was arguing, the Kurds would have done a proper job and not left a single Armenian. As to those Armenians who did convert, “In Hizan a few villages of Armenians did convert of their own free will and applied to the authorities to have their conversions recognized. This was not done and they continue to live as Muslims, have the *ezan* chanted, and pray five times a day. It is this that has been used by the Armenian subversives who seize upon the least excuse to slander the Sublime State.” The governor added that since Akhdamar was “virtually a home of subversion” the refugees should not be allowed to swell the numbers there.<sup>66</sup>

Two days later Ömer Paşa clarified his position still further:

[According to the latest information received from the *kaymakam* of Hizan] two thousand six men and one thousand fifteen women, making a total of three thousand two hundred and eleven, the majority in fifty-four villages of Armenians, have made it known that they have accepted Islam of their own free will. Some of the people of the said villages kept their own faith. This shows that the claim of the Embassy is entirely baseless. Because if the Armenians were supposedly invited into Islam and if those who refused were killed, all the remaining Armenians in these villages would have been dead and even those going to Akhtamar would have been killed.

The governor could not resist adding, “Those misinforming the Embassy are a few well-known missionaries who are in fact the ones who are after converting people.”<sup>67</sup> Apparently there was nothing unusual about the fact that three thousand and twenty-one people should suddenly become enamored with Islam and seek the true path “of their own free will,” when they were surrounded by hostile Kurds.

#### ABDUCTION OF WOMEN

That this “free will” was often the result of terror was born out by the efforts subsequently made by some foreign consuls to rescue women who had been

<sup>65</sup> BOA A.MKT MHM 619/35 22 Kanun-u Evvel 1311/4 Jan. 1896, cipher telegram from Governor of Van Nazım Paşa to Sublime Porte.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. “Dilboş” is evidently a corruption of “*dilbo*,” meaning “liar” in Armenian, and, as an anonymous reviewer observed, “is obviously an insult conjured by the Ottoman authorities.” My thanks to this reviewer.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 24 Kanun-u Sani 1311/6 Jan. 1896. Also, it seems that the Paşa could not add.

abducted during the massacres and forced into marriage. A large portion of Gustave Meyrier's correspondence from Diyarbekir deals with this issue: "Yesterday they brought back six women, none of them wanted to go back to her family. I know and I have living proof at hand that these unfortunates behave like this because they are threatened with death by the Kurds and they have no confidence in the protection of the authorities." He proposed that rather than lodging these women in Muslim homes where they were subject to threats, they should be handed back to their religious leaders and kept in the church during the investigation.<sup>68</sup> A few days later Meyrier reported that a nine-year-old girl had been brought in who refused to return to her community. When the bishop of the Syriac Catholics intervened, Governor Enis Paşa "publicly reminded him of the Salonica affair where two consuls had been killed in similar circumstances and said he could not expose himself to similar inconveniences. I take this as a personal and direct threat." This statement about the "killing of two Consuls in Salonica in similar circumstances" was indeed perceived as a threat by the French and British Embassies, who protested energetically to the Porte.<sup>69</sup>

Enis Paşa came as close as possible to having his knuckles rapped officially and he was asked in rather stern terms: "In order for there not to ensue anything untoward and likely to cause murmurings please clarify if such a conversation did or did not take place."<sup>70</sup> Enis Paşa replied: "Christian women who had been dispersed here and there during the troubles are being recovered and handed back to their families or religious leaders." There was a problem however: "Some of these have become Muslim of their own free will and married Muslims and are now firmly declaring that they will not accept either their families or Christianity."<sup>71</sup> Enis Paşa then went on to recount his conversation with the Syriac bishop. Apparently, just as the Armenian metropolitan and the bishop were visiting with him, a group of girls and women were brought in from the surrounding villages. Questioned in the presence of the metropolitan and the bishop, they declared, "they would in no circumstance go back to their families or churches." At this point the bishop had intervened over the case of a twelve-year-old Syriac girl who was insisting that she was Muslim and an

<sup>68</sup> Meyrier, *Les Massacres de Diyarbekir*; Gustave Meyrier to Paul Cambon, 12 Mar. 1896, 85 (my translation).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 175. It is interesting that Enis Paşa should bring up the famous "Salonica incident" of May 1876, where the conversion of a Bulgarian girl and her subsequent abduction by the Christians of that city caused a full-blown riot and the French and German consuls were murdered by the mobs. Here Enis Paşa may well have been subtly threatening Meyrier. On the Salonica Incident, see Mark Mazower, *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews 1430–1950* (London, 2004), 170–75.

<sup>70</sup> BOA A.MKT MHM 637/16 13 Mart 1312/26 Mar. 1896, cipher telegram from Sublime Porte to *vilayet* of Diyarbekir. "Sızıldı" (murmuring, lamentation) was one of the most common Ottoman euphemisms for "trouble from foreigners."

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* 14 Mart 1312/ 27 Mar. 1896, *vali* of Diyarbekir Enis Paşa to Sublime Porte.

adult. The bishop stated that as a child her testimony was invalid and that she should be returned to her community. At this point the conversation took an interesting turn:

I told the bishop that we also did not approve of the likes of her remaining Muslim and that the reason why we did not officially carry out their conversions was precisely in order for them to be able to return to their previous religions now or later. But nor can it be acceptable, given the times and the circumstances, to drag such a person by the arm and hair to the church, when they are openly and in front of witnesses declaring that they are Muslims. This is also against the principle of religious freedom (*hürriyet-i mezhebiye*) that my government has always defended, and touches upon the matter of national feelings (*hissiyat-ı milliye tokunur*). From small matters such as this big problems may arise, particularly as public excitement has only just been appeased and efforts are being made to assure its continuity.<sup>72</sup>

This is a cleverly formulated position. The reference to the official line to not accept mass conversion is mentioned, ostensibly keeping the door open for an eventual return to Christianity, although it was highly unlikely that a terrorized young person could find the courage to take such a step.

The issue of the abduction of women also had a specific gender dimension. Very often, in addition to fear, many women refused to return to their communities due to shame. A loss of virginity in these circumstances would condemn them to lifelong stigmatization at home and end their marriage prospects. Forced conversion was therefore much more traumatic for women because it involved institutionalized rape under the cover of “marriage” to their abductors.<sup>73</sup>

What is most remarkable was the Paşa’s reference to “religious freedom,” which was clearly a polite fiction in this context, not to say a travesty. Even more striking is his reference to “national feelings,” because it gives away the nature of the massacres as a manifestation of “national feeling,” and implies that a provocative act could once again enflame them and spark further massacres. Even so, he makes no direct mention of the Salonica affair, but only states, “big problems could arise from small matters.”<sup>74</sup>

The British Embassy continued to pressure the Foreign Ministry, claiming, “Over one hundred Christians remain in the hands of the Kurds and are afraid to reveal their true religious inclination because of fear.”<sup>75</sup> The Ministry

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> For a discussion of “sexual humiliation used to intimidate the Armenian community” during the genocide of 1915, see, Katherine Derderian, “Common Fate, Different Experience: Gender-Specific Aspects of the Armenian Genocide, 1915–1917, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 19 (2005): 1–25. Although this article deals with a later period, the experiences of Armenian women in the 1890s must have been very similar.

<sup>74</sup> Meyrier, *Les Massacres de Diarbekir*. Meyrier was not present when the conversation took place, but had the account from the bishop. Nonetheless, it is possible that Enis Paşa mentioned the Salonica incident because he was from that city.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 28 Mart 1896/10 Apr. 1896, Foreign Minister Tevfik Paşa to Sublime Porte, Foreign Ministry Chancery, no. 292.

also relayed information from the British Embassy to the effect that the commission which had been sent to recover Christian women had brought sixteen such women to Diyarbekir on 11 March: "Because they were threatened by death by the Kurds who had abducted them and by the Muslim population, they said they did not want to go back to their families and did not trust the local authorities to protect them. . . . These threats led them to change their minds [about declaring for Christianity]."<sup>76</sup>

Meyrier repeatedly told his ambassador that the Ottoman authorities in Diyarbekir were deliberately blocking his efforts to reunite abducted women with their families. "Their situation is indeed lamentable; in all this morbid affair, they deserve the most compassion."<sup>77</sup> He reported further that the abducted victims were threatened "not only by their ravishers but also by other Muslims." Meyrier had sent one Muslim and two Christians into the villages around Diyarbekir to rescue the victims of abduction, but they had been largely unsuccessful. "It seems many murders have been committed in the villages for similar reasons." The consul had given the delegation a list of some hundred names, but they had returned with only one woman and her daughter. The delegation was sure that the Kurds hid the victims and sometimes even transported them from one village to another.<sup>78</sup>

British Vice-Consul C. M. Hallward, in Diyarbekir, summarized the situation: "In all about 8,000 appear to have been killed in the *vilayet*, and 25,000 turned Moslem. Upwards of 500 women and girls have been abducted. . . . I give these figures for what they are worth and subject to correction . . . . The general belief is that the whole thing was organized by Ennis Paşa, the Vali, in concert with some of the leading Moslems."<sup>79</sup> Meyrier had already identified some of these "leading Muslims," including Cemil Paşa, "ex-governor of Yemen known for his fanaticism," and Arif Efendi, a local leader of the Kurds. At the behest of the embassies, the Porte was obliged to send a commission of enquiry to Diyarbekir, led by Abdullah Paşa, one of the sultan's aides-de-camps, and one of the few Ottoman officials about whom the diplomats had anything good to say.<sup>80</sup> Meyrier stated, "Abdullah Paşa knows that the tension in the area is kept up by them."<sup>81</sup> Abdullah Paşa reported that it was indeed Cemil Paşa and Arif Efendi who had spread a rumor during Ramazan that "all the Christians were going to be massacred

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 16 Mart 1312/29 Mar. 1896, Foreign Minister Tevfik Paşa to Sublime Porte, Foreign Ministry Chancery, no. 117.

<sup>77</sup> Meyrier, *Les Massacres de Diarbekir*, 175–79, 20 Mar. 1896.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 21 Mar. 1896, 179.

<sup>79</sup> Vice-Consul Hallward to Consul Cumberlach, 17 Mar. 1896; *British Blue Book: Turkey, 1896*, as cited in Meyrier, *Les Massacres de Diarbekir*, 215–16.

<sup>80</sup> Walker, *Armenia*, 147. Chief Dragoman of the British Embassy Adam Block referred to Abdullah Paşa as "a fairly straight man."

<sup>81</sup> Meyrier, *Les Massacres de Diarbekir*, 171.

and that this was an order of the sultan." Abdullah Paşa was particularly scathing about Arif Efendi: "Although the imperial instructions that the said people be scolded and told that measures will be taken if they do not mend their ways will work on Cemil Paşa, no amount of advice can effect Arif Efendi who is known for his bad behavior . . . and is after increasing his influence and glory by provoking further disturbances." Accordingly, Abdullah Paşa advised that Arif be exiled "as an example to others of like mind."<sup>82</sup> The Porte, however, considerably softened the punishment and instructed Abdullah Paşa that "Arif Efendi not be exiled but that it be suggested to him that he remove himself temporarily to Mosul."<sup>83</sup> On 24 March, Abdullah Paşa asked permission to end the commission and return to Istanbul since "peace and order reigns again and we have seen the end of Ramazan without any trouble."<sup>84</sup> Meyrier felt that the issue of abducted girls and women had broken Abdullah Paşa: "Abdullah Paşa, who at the beginning had taken this matter to heart, told me lately that he was discouraged and he no longer wanted to occupy himself with it. He has certainly received orders from his superiors which have changed, if not his mode of thought, at least his mode of action."<sup>85</sup>

Meanwhile, Enis Paşa, far from being held responsible for the massacres, remained at his post. This was despite various promises that the French and British Embassies extracted from the Porte that he would be dismissed. The French Embassy actually told Meyrier that the Council of Ministers had suggested to the sultan that he be replaced.<sup>86</sup> Evidently, Enis Paşa had the sultan's support because he was still in place well after the Inspection Committee left Diyarbekir. Moreover, he continued to deny the British claims that a large number of Christians were still being held by Kurds, and to report on cases of, "women and children who were dispersed here and there during the troubles and are now being recovered and turned over to their families." He reported on 17 April that two women and two boys had been brought in from the *kazas* of Eğin and Garb. The two boys and one of the women had declared that they were Christians and had been handed over to their families. The other woman, who had a six-year-old child with her, "had insisted that she was a Muslim even after she had been put in an empty room with her brother." Presumably the brother was to try to dissuade her.<sup>87</sup> As late as the summer of

<sup>82</sup> BOA YA HUS 347/58 23 Şubat 1311/8 Mar. 1895, Committee of Inspection to Sublime Porte.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 23 Ramazan 1311/10 Mar. 1896, Sublime Porte Receiver's Office, Grand Vizier Rıfat Paşa.

<sup>84</sup> BOA YA HUS 348/52 11 Mart 1312/24 Mar. 1896, Committee of Inspection to Sublime Porte.

<sup>85</sup> Meyrier, *Les Massacres de Diarbekir*, 183.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, Jules de La Bouliere to Gustave Meyrier, 27 Feb. 1896, 184.

<sup>87</sup> BOA A.MKT MHM 637/19 4 Nisan 1312/17 Apr. 1896, Enis Paşa to Sublime Porte. That this particular woman had a six-year-old child shows that she had "married" some six years previously, probably making it impossible to return even if she wanted to. The child would have been born

1896 Enis Paşa continued to hold his post. Again responding to an accusation of the British Embassy that he was carrying out forced conversions, he confidently declared, “These are the slanders of enemies” (*müfteriat-ı bedhahaniyeden*).<sup>88</sup>

#### MASS CONVERSION AS A DIPLOMATIC ISSUE

No doubt Enis Paşa would have counted the foreign consuls among his “enemies.” One of the most celebrated cases of forced conversion and subsequent return to Christianity was that of the Armenians of Birecik near present-day Urfa. The case became something of a cause célèbre as an international diplomatic crisis involving the British, French, and Russian governments. On 3 March 1895 it was reported that a sizeable population (some two hundred households) of Armenians had converted to Islam in Birecik, in southeast Anatolia. The Ottoman government had therefore consented to send a mixed commission to the area, consisting of two officials from the *vilayet* of Aleppo, and the dragoman of the British Embassy, Fitzmaurice.<sup>89</sup> The commission had interviewed leaders of the convert community who were named as “ex-Gregorians Haçık Efendi, now called Mehmet Şakir Efendi, and Abos Efendi now called Şeyh Müslim Efendi, ex-Catholic Hacibe-kuzan Efendi now called İbrahim Efendi.” The leaders of the community openly stated, “The recent events had caused them to fear for their lives, and that was why they became Muslim.” They also promised that they would not convert back to Christianity once the danger was over. Also, “The conversion of the church which they had made into a mosque was done entirely at their own expense, and they had no intention whatever of converting it back to a church.” The Armenians interviewed were then asked to sign a report written by the commission. The report recorded, “The community had not been subjected to any pressure or force in accepting Islam but had only acted out of fear of recent events, being obviously in a state of great distress and poverty after the recent calamities and the sacking of their property.” On 28 May the *vali* of Aleppo was asked his opinion on the matter. The Ottoman governor reiterated that the Armenian converts had converted “only because they feared for their lives” (*surf muhafaza-i hayat maksadına müsteniddir*). He pointed out that the state had two options. If it wanted to allow the Armenians to remain where they were, and revert to Christianity, it was necessary to

---

some years before the massacres. Abduction of Armenian women by the Kurds was a common complaint throughout the period. See Arménouhie Kévonian, *Les Noces Noires de Gulizar* (Paris, 1993).

<sup>88</sup> BOA A.MKT MHM 637/33 1 Temmuz 1312/14 July 1896, Enis Paşa to Sublime Porte.

<sup>89</sup> BOA Y.A.HUS 352/1, 18 Şubat 1311/3 Mar. 1895, Sublime Porte, Office of the Grand Vizier, report prepared by accountant of the *evkaf* of Aleppo Ali Rıza, President of the Court of Aleppo Mustafa, Dragoman of the British Embassy Fitzmaurice.

“execute some of those Muslims who had taken part in the killing and looting, in order to frighten the [rest of the population].” This would only work, however, for the urban areas. Those in the countryside would still be unable to circulate among the Kurdish tribes who were their neighbors, “which is in fact the very reason for their insistence on the sincerity of their conversion.” The second option was to move the converts somewhere far from Birecik, so that when they re-converted back to Christianity, their Muslim neighbors would not know that they were apostates.<sup>90</sup>

Fitzmaurice remarked on what I have called the dangerous state of limbo for all new converts:

As the legal formalities necessary on conversion to Islam had not yet been performed, the Government refused to recognize them as such before demanding instructions from Aleppo; and, as the population were still menacing in their attitude, and reproached them with insincerity in their newly-adopted faith, to prove their sincerity, in the face of threats, the Armenians proceeded to convert their church into a mosque, which they called “Hamidieh Mosque” after His Imperial Majesty the Sultan; some of them took a second wife, went through the rite of circumcision. . . . They now all wear turbans, and are apparently most zealous in their attendance at the mosque and in the other observances of their newly adopted religion. . . . A declaration of Christianity by them at the present would be most dangerous.<sup>91</sup>

Fitzmaurice for his part was convinced that the massacres and conversions were the work of the central government and the local authorities: “In the final massacre, faced with a Moslem mob crying ‘Our Padishah has ordered that the Armenians be massacred, and that no Christians are to be left in the country,’ the Ottoman official and reserve soldiers who had turned up in early December stood aside.”<sup>92</sup> From Birecik, Fitzmaurice traveled to Urfa, the scene of the most severe massacres where, he said, eight thousand Armenians had been killed in two days, half of them burnt alive in the cathedral.<sup>93</sup>

Fitzmaurice returned to Istanbul in April but was back in Birecik on 30 May as part of the Birecik Commission of Enquiry that the sultan had agreed to form. He also claimed to have persuaded at least some of the Armenians who had converted, “under the influence of terror,” to return to Christianity, and to demand the protection promised by the sultan. But he was not so successful in the villages since “he found them too fearful.”<sup>94</sup> This is born out by the Ottoman sources. The *vilayet* of Aleppo reported on 10 September 1896 that in Urfa, “The majority (*kısm-ı azamı*) of the one thousand Armenians who had converted to Islam, having seen the return of peace and order, have

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>91</sup> Vice-Consul Fitzmaurice to Sir P. Currie, 5 Mar. 1896, *Turkey*, no. 5 (1896), *Correspondence Relating to the Asiatic Provinces of Turkey*, 4–5.

<sup>92</sup> Berridge, *Gerald Fitzmaurice (1865–1939): Chief Dragoman of the British Embassy in Turkey* (Leiden, 2007), 27.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 28–30.

returned to their old faith. The remnants insist on remaining Muslims. The English official Fitzmaurice seems satisfied with this outcome and is preparing to leave.”<sup>95</sup>

It appears that by the summer of 1897 fear still ruled, but the worst was over and a shade of normalcy returned. There is a very interesting paper trail relating to the conversion to Islam and potential return to Christianity of the Armenians in the *sancaks* of Sason and Genc in the *vilayet* of Bitlis. On 11 August, the Foreign Ministry was informed that in Genc a total of 105 households in twelve *nahiyes* had made it known that they had converted during the “troubles of eighteen ninety five,” and now wanted to return to their original faith, but were afraid to do so. Some of the Armenians who had reverted to their original faith had complained that the population officer (*nüfus müdürü*) of Genc, a certain Haydar Efendi, had tampered with the registers, and by increasing the ages of male children was now demanding that they pay an extortionate amount of military exemption tax (*bedel i askeri*). In reaction, the Armenians had stated that they were returning to Islam.<sup>96</sup> What is remarkable here is that the Armenian Islamo/Christians felt their position was at least safe enough to enable them to bargain with the state. One week later the *vilayet* of Bitlis reported, “All the Christians who had converted to Islam during the troubles have now returned to their old faith without suffering pressure of any kind.” It was further reported that the Armenians who had claimed they were being unfairly taxed were part of the “unregistered population” (*nüfus-u mektume*).<sup>97</sup>

In response to the declaration that they would go back to Islam, the *vali* of Bitlis blandly declared: “It is entirely up to them to decide whether they want to become Muslims or remain as Christians . . . but it has been determined by the Ministry of Finance that they are to pay the *bedel* from the date of their birth to the date they became unregistered population.” In other words, the state was telling them that they were responsible for their tax arrears as Christians even if they turned Muslim. In the event, the people in question remained Christians.<sup>98</sup> Despite the evident tension, the official fiction was kept up. On

<sup>95</sup> BOA Y.A HUS 359/6 28 Ağustos 1312/10 Sept. 1896, *vilayet* of Aleppo to Sublime Porte.

<sup>96</sup> BOA A.MKT MHM 620/50 29 Temmuz 1313/11 Aug. 1897, Foreign Minister Tevfik Paşa to Sublime Porte, Foreign Ministry Secretariat, no. 1969. The *nahiye* in question were Paçar, Zeyr, Morvarik, İzmunağ, Herpershehur, Zihiten, Darbuğ, Dareyeni, Karpap, Çananleşkiye, Valber, and Gurnus. I have been unable to determine what these localities are called today. None of them appears in *Osmanlı Yer Adları* or *Osmanlı Yer Adları Sözlüğü*. It is highly possible that they no longer exist as distinct entities.

<sup>97</sup> BOA A.MKT MHM 620/50 29 Temmuz 1313/11 Aug. 1897, Foreign Minister Tevfik Paşa to Sublime Porte, Foreign Ministry Secretariat, no. 1969. “Nüfus-u Mektume” was an official category of people who had not been counted in the 1882–1885 census. I thank Cem Behar for this information. On the Ottoman censuses, see, Cem Behar and Alan Duben, *Istanbul Households* (Cambridge, UK, 1991), 15–20.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. Vali of Bitlis Ömer Paşa to Sublime Porte. 5 Ağustos 1313/18 Aug. 1897, “Hristiyan kalmak veya İslam olmak her kesin ihtiyarında olduğu. . .”

8 November the Foreign Ministry wrote, “The claim of the British Embassy that the Christians who converted during the troubles were now afraid to return to their old faith because of the attitude of the Kurds, is entirely unfounded.” The Minister declared, “The nine hundred Christians in the *kaza* of Genc have since reverted back to their old faith and are practicing their religion in complete peace and security.”<sup>99</sup>

It appears that the fallout of 1895 lasted a long time. On 26 April 1902 the British Embassy had reported that twelve families amounting to seventy-five souls in the village of Çatal, *kaza* of Andırın, *vilayet* of Aleppo, “who had been forced to accept Islam to save their lives during the troubles” had applied to return to their original faith. The embassy claimed they had been prevented from doing so by the local authorities who were forcing them to have their children circumcised and to marry their daughters to Muslims.<sup>100</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The issue of mass conversions of Armenians is obviously linked to the whole vexed issue of whether the massacres were ordered, inspired, or encouraged by the sultan and his government. The question is, to what extent does this study of mass conversions change, confirm, or reject the position that Sultan Abdülhamid and his government were directly responsible for the massacres?

François Georgeon, in the only recent political biography of Abdülhamid II, gives a very balanced assessment. Georgeon contends that the view of the sultan “avenging himself against the Armenians” for forcing him into reforms that he did not want to carry out goes against “the extreme prudence in foreign and domestic policy that he manifested during his long reign.”<sup>101</sup>

Also, the fact was that there were whole regions that escaped the massacres through the energetic actions of some local authorities. The actual massacres were carried out by “the Muslims of eastern Anatolia, notables, dervishes, *ulema* (religious functionaries), and the *şeyhs* of Kurdish tribes.” All of these elements were terrified “by the spectre of an independent Armenia,” where they would become immigrants (*muhacir*), as it happened in the Balkans. That was why the massacres “spread like shockwaves” immediately after the announcement of the sultan’s acceptance of the reforms. Various sources attest that provocative sermons were preached in mosques after Friday prayers, spreading the rumor that the reforms amounted to the granting of independence to the Armenians.<sup>102</sup> This would explain why many of the massacres occurred on Fridays, although the Turkish documentation puts the onus on the

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 26, Teşrin-i Evvel 1313/8 Nov. 1897, Foreign Ministry to Sublime Porte, no. 2931.

<sup>100</sup> BOA A.MKT MHM 654/10 13 Nisan 1318/26 Apr. 1902, Sublime Porte to Ministry of Interior. Andırın is today the sub-prefecture of Göksun in the *vilayet* of Muş. See *Osmanlı Yer Adları Sözlüğü*.

<sup>101</sup> François Georgeon, *Abdülhamid II: Le sultan calife* (Paris, 2003), 293.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 294.

Armenians and almost invariably states that Armenians attacked Muslims while the men were in the mosque at Friday prayer.<sup>103</sup> Most foreign sources agree that local officials like Enis Paşa at Diyarbekir were often involved in aiding and abetting the massacres.<sup>104</sup> Dragoman Fitzmaurice for his part was convinced that the massacres occurred at a signal from the sultan: “No direct orders had been issued . . . but clear hints had come down from Yıldız that ‘it would be desirable to give the Armenians a good lesson.’ In an Oriental country, he said, this was all that was needed.”<sup>105</sup>

Yet, most sources agree that there is no evidence of a direct order on the part of Abdülhamid to massacre Armenians: “Although there is no direct evidence that the sultan ordered the massacres, the timing is suspect, with the events occurring just after the reform decree was issued.”<sup>106</sup> It is my opinion that Abdülhamid intended to cow, decimate, and humble the Armenians, but not to destroy them.

Robert Melson has drawn attention to the distinction that must be made between the policies of Abdülhamid and the subsequent policies of the Young Turks: “Sultan Abdul Hamid II had no intention of exterminating the Armenians or destroying the Armenian millet as such. The main reason why total genocide was not perpetrated by the Ottoman regime in 1894–1896 was its commitment to Islam, to the millet system, and to restoring the old order. Abdul Hamid was not a revolutionary. . . . The Porte was able to go along with or to help perpetrate massacre, but it was not willing to go so far as to destroy the Armenian millet.”<sup>107</sup>

Hüseyin Nazım Paşa stated in his memoirs, “It is a complete lie and a slander to say that Abdülhamid ordered the massacre of the Armenians.” But then, he would—he was the minister of police.<sup>108</sup> François Georgeon notes that Abdülhamid was loath to use regular army units, but this compunction applied only to their use against the Muslim population.<sup>109</sup> This makes perfect sense because such violence would be perceived as the Caliph of Islam defending Christians at the expense of Muslims.

When Said Paşa, ex-Foreign Minister and sometime Grand Vizier, took refuge with the British Embassy in 1895, “firmly convinced that the Sultan intended to deprive him of liberty if not of life,” he openly confided in the British Ambassador, “The Sultan’s complicity in the Sassoun massacres received full confirmation from him, and he quoted a statement made by His

<sup>103</sup> Hüseyin Nazım Paşa, *Ermeni Olayları Tarihi*, vol. 1, 94, 100.

<sup>104</sup> Georgeon, *Abdülhamid II*, 294–95.

<sup>105</sup> Berridge, *Gerald Fitzmaurice*, 25.

<sup>106</sup> Taner Akçam, *Shameful Act*, 42.

<sup>107</sup> Robert Melson, *Revolution and Genocide: On the Origins of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust* (Chicago, 1992), 69.

<sup>108</sup> Hüseyin Nazım Paşa, *Hatıralarım*, 49.

<sup>109</sup> Georgeon, *Abdülhamid II*, 295.

Majesty that the Armenian question must be settled not by reform but by blood. ‘At first’ he said, ‘I did not understand his meaning. I thought he referred to war with a foreign Power, but I find he meant massacre.’”<sup>110</sup>

That the massacres ceased abruptly, even if the state of terror continued, strongly implies that they were not simply acts of spontaneous cruelty: “If we regard the atrocities as the mere sadistic cruelty of a half-mad tyrant, or an expression of Moslem fanaticism, [if] the massacres could be explained in either of these two ways, there was no way of stopping them at all. Evidently, they must be seen as deliberate acts of policy.” Abdülhamid told the British Ambassador Sir Philip Currie in 1897, “The Armenian question is finally closed.”<sup>111</sup>

Even if most of the evidence pointing to official complicity or official inspiration is circumstantial, it is also substantial. In the light of the above, how can we contextualize the issue of mass conversions during the Hamidian massacres? The key seems to be the official policy that individual conversions were permissible but that mass conversions were not to be accepted. Several remarks can be made on this conjuncture. The ostensible reason for the state’s refusal to accept mass conversions was that at some later date, at first opportunity, the Armenians would “complain to the foreigners” that they had been forced to convert. Even if this reason is taken at face value, it still means that it is depriving the Armenians of a last desperate measure of defense against being massacred. The official documentation openly stated on all occasions that the reason for the conversions was “fear of the Kurds” (*ekrad’dan havf ve haşiyetleri*). When an Armenian village converted, but their conversion was not accepted officially, they were in that very dangerous state of limbo in which they were at the mercy of the Kurds and other Muslims who were looking for the slightest excuse to fall upon them. To take a cynical view, this would suit the state because on the one hand they could claim to the observers on the spot, like the foreign consuls or missionaries and their superiors in Istanbul, that they had nothing to do with it and the mass conversions and previous or subsequent massacres were the result of popular outrage that they could not control. Then again, their interest would be served either through the Armenians becoming genuine Muslims or by their eventual decimation by the Kurds. Also, telling Armenian potential converts “you may convert individually once order has been restored” seems disingenuous at best when there was a very real chance that they would not live that long.

<sup>110</sup> Douglas, “Britain and the Armenian Question,” 125. Douglas cites: Salisbury Papers, Christ Church, Oxford, Currie to Salisbury, 11 Dec. 1895 (Salisbury, A/135, fols. 249–56).

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 132. Douglas cites: Salisbury Papers, Christ Church, Oxford, Currie to Salisbury, 28 Oct 1897 (Salisbury, A/137, fols. 145–49).

Dragoman Fitzmaurice certainly did not nourish any illusions about the actual conversions being the result of “free will”:

I would beg here to point out and it is a distinction upon which the Turkish authorities may lay great stress, that the Moslems did not with axes in their hands invite the Christians to choose between the alternatives of Islam or death. They simply showed and proved their determined resolve to massacre all Christians, and the latter, to save their lives, accepted Islamism. It is the subtle logical distinction between objective and subjective. The alternatives offered by the Mussulmans were not Islam or death, whereas the only alternatives left to the Christians were those of death or Islam. So that the Armenians, to save themselves from certain death, became Mussulmans of their own free will, if, indeed, people under such terrible circumstances can in any way be considered as free agents possessing a free will.<sup>112</sup>

The deliberate delay in the conversion formalities seems also reprehensible from the standpoint of Islamic jurisprudence. In an earlier period, at least in one instance, the Şeyhülislam’s office (*fetvahane*) had issued an official *fetva* denouncing the negligence of officials who declined to accept a conversion: “If any individual from among the infidels presents himself before any governor, ruler or officer or even anybody from the humble folk, saying ‘make me a Muslim and initiate me in the faith,’ if he was to receive the answer ‘I do not know’ or ‘go to so and so’ this is verily the greatest of sins. . . . This delay and neglect is against Şeriat rulings and deserves divine retribution.”<sup>113</sup>

Indeed just what they meant by “individual” or “isolated” (*münferid*) conversions is a moot point. Who decided on the conversion? It would seem that heads of families would make the decision or, as in the case of the Birecik Armenians seen above, community leaders. How many heads or heads of families had to be counted for the act to qualify as an acceptable conversion? It must also be born in mind that the various references in the documents to the Armenians “converting freely and without pressure,” almost always occur right after a reference to their converting “out of fear of the Kurds,” which puts an entirely new face on the idea of free will. It appears that, to Hamidian officialdom at least, fear of recent massacres or their probable repetition amounted to free will. In at least one case, the Armenians are said to be converting *after* the immediate danger had passed because their villages had already been hit and this was held as proof of the genuineness of the conversion. In another case the converted Armenians are told that even if they convert they will still be responsible for extortionist tax arrears. The frequent reference to grown men having themselves circumcised in what were most likely to be primitive hygienic conditions, but this still not qualifying as a legitimate conversion, also seems to point in the direction of official complicity. The repeated references to

<sup>112</sup> Vice Consul Fitzmaurice to Sir P. Currie Birejik, 5 Mar. 1896, *Turkey*, no. 5 (1896), 3.

<sup>113</sup> BOA. A.MKT 86/42 15 Receb 1263/24 June 1847, *fetva* from the Shaikh ul-Islam’s office regarding the breach in the procedure of conversion on the part of the *kaza* council of Sehirkoyn and the *eyalet* of Niş.

Armenians “applying every day” to have their conversions recognized, to renew their marriage vows, must surely indicate a serious degree of desperation that the state was choosing to ignore. In particular, references to “natural inclinations to convert” because of proximity to Muslims as a genuine motive for conversion appears to be highly cynical. Open admission that Armenian claims to forced conversion are baseless because if the Kurds wanted to they would not have spared any of them, comes as close as is possible to an official admission of complicity. Another striking thing is that almost all the cases of forced conversions refer to their being the result of fear of the Kurds; there is hardly any mention of fine upstanding non-Kurdish citizens taking part in the slaughter. The official attitude in relation to the abduction of Armenian girls and women is also highly suspect. The mention of the provocation of “national feelings” if one tampered too closely with the abductors strongly implies that some degree of official approval was extended to the acts that had led to the “national feelings” becoming enflamed.

Many questions remain. What proportion of the converts converted back to Apostolic Christianity? How many remained Muslims? What was their fate in 1915? Did they keep contact with their former communities? These are all problems for subsequent research. As to how the ex-Armenian Muslims “feel” their new identity, the answer to that question will probably never be known.