

INTRODUCTION

CONTEXTUALIZING THE SAYFO IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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“We should not let them return to their homelands”

—From a telegram of Talaat to the governors of Mosul and Van provinces,
30 June, 1915.

This book focuses on a little-known genocide of the Assyrian peoples that took place at the same time as the well-known Armenian genocide during the First World War. The sorrow and loss caused by the killing and displacement of ancestors has been a painful memory for the Assyrians ever since. But the memory of the massacres, deportations and expulsions of the Assyrians has long been confined inside families and religious communities, only seldom told to outsiders. As with the Armenian genocide, the official stance of Turkey has been to deny that anything near a genocide ever befell the Assyrians. Representatives of the various traditionally Syriac-speaking Christian minorities, here referred to collectively by the cross-denominational name ‘Assyrians’, estimated that 250,000 of their number perished between 1914 and 1918. The population had been reduced to half its original size (Namik

and Nedjib 1919). Before 1914 the Assyrians lived in a wide region in what is now south-east Turkey, north-western Iran and the northern parts of Syria and Iraq. Academic source-based research on their fate has only recently started (de Courtois 2004; Gaunt 2006; Hellot-Bellier 2014). Fortunately, it is becoming integrated into the overall history of the Armenian genocide and in that way is increasingly recognized as a genocide in its own right (Suny, Göçek and Naimark 2011; Kaiser 2014; Kévorkian and Ternon 2014; Suny 2015; De Waal 2015). But there are still many aspects that need further investigation.

The genocide during the First World War did not come without warning. For decades the Assyrian peoples had been the victims of increasing violence and dispossession, to which the Ottoman governments were constant bystanders. Much of this violence had a colonial aspect, that is, to seize land and property, but other aspects were religious, that is, forced conversion to Islam or death; another aspect that came late into the overall picture was political, to create a homogeneous Turkish national identity by destroying those peoples and cultures that were considered impossible to assimilate. Although the motives varied, the long chain of massacres kept a feeling of vulnerability alive. When the genocide began, it was preceded by posters spreading jihad propaganda among the local Muslim population, in the manner of an announcement (Hellot-Bellier 2014).

The first instance of mass violence that specifically targeted Assyrians in the nineteenth century was in the 1840s, when the Kurdish emir of Bohtan, Badr Khan, invaded the Hakkari mountains twice and attacked the Assyrian tribes. According to European newspapers, tens of thousands were murdered. Further mass violence followed in the 1870s and in the so-called Hamidiye massacres of the 1890s. In most parts of south-eastern Anatolia, when Armenians were attacked, their Assyrian neighbours suffered the same brutality.

Massacres and ethnic cleansing in Anatolia proceeded in a manner that makes it difficult to generalize (Gaunt 2015a). Basically, the events reflected territorial and religious divisions among the Assyrians, thus shaping three very different patterns. One pattern, that of ethnic cleansing, refers to the Hakkari mountain area populated by people belonging to the Church of the East (formerly also known as Nestorians); the second pattern is that of imperialist invasion and concerns the district of Urmia, a part of north-western Iran populated both by members of the Church of the East and the Chaldean Church; and the third is that of the systematic attacks on towns and villages in the neighbourhood of the province of Diyarbakir (also spelled Diyarbekir) populated mostly by Syriac Orthodox and Syriac Catholic believers. Details of these events will be presented later in this introduction.

In a nutshell, the official Ottoman government's deportations and massacres of Assyrians started on 26 October 1914.¹ Through a ciphered telegram, Minister of the Interior Talaat ordered the deportation of Assyrians living along the border with Iran. They were to be sent inwards to central Anatolia and dispersed so that only a few would be living in any particular village. This order was never implemented because war with Russia broke out a few days later. Instead, irregular Kurdish cavalry perpetrated massacres intended to cause the population to flee. From this starting point, attacks on Assyrians spread eastwards into Iran and westwards into the provinces of Bitlis, Diyarbakir, Harput and Aleppo. Ottoman troops, irregular Kurdish cavalry, pardoned criminals, local jihadists and specially formed death squads were the prime perpetrators. In all territories the Assyrians tried to mount armed resistance and in a few cases were successful. The houses and other property of the victims were confiscated by the state and redistributed to Muslim refugees. The bulk of the government-sponsored killing ceased with an order by Interior Minister Talaat to stop the hostility against the Assyrians (but not the Armenians) on 25 December 1915.² After that date, Assyrians were still being attacked but on an individual basis and without the commitment of government resources. The war ended in November 1918 and some of those Assyrians who had survived tried to return to their homes. When the Republic of Turkey was established in 1923, a new wave of state violence was directed against the Assyrians remaining in Turkey. Those trying to revive their villages in Hakkari were driven out by a large military operation. The Syriac Orthodox patriarch was sent into exile and members of his church living in the town of Urfa were deported in 1924. Only a tiny enclave of Assyrians remained in the tiny south-eastern district of Midyat (also known as Tur Abdin).

Most of the killings and deportations had a local background. The case of the Assyrian mountaineers of Hakkari differs greatly from the story of the Syriac Orthodox and Chaldeans. The Assyrian tribes of the Hakkari mountains had an autonomous legal position under the traditional secular-religious leader Patriarch Mar Shimun, who combined both religious and secular tasks in his leadership. The Ottomans called these people *Nasturi* (Nestorians). These Assyrians lived on both sides of the Turkish-Iranian border and this position was becoming increasingly precarious. Russia and Turkey both had ambitions in Iran and this conflict affected all of the many different ethnic groups living in the border zone, primarily Sunni and Shia Kurds, Turkish-speaking Azeris, Armenians, Assyrians, Chaldeans and Jews. The Assyrian tribes on the Turkish side of the border were isolated, living in small villages in alpine terrain. By the end of the nineteenth century, they were in contact with

Russian diplomats, military and religious figures, who promised them protection (Lazarev 1964). In all fairness, the Ottomans also sought to woo the Assyrians but had less success as siding with Russia gave the Assyrians hope of greater autonomy. Even the British government had contact with the Assyrians through its consular officer in Van who, under the terms of the Treaty of Berlin of 1878, was to monitor the human rights of the Christian minorities, and the Anglican Church established a mission (Coakley 1992). As the war loomed, Russian influence increased and some Assyrian communities joined the Russian Orthodox Church. Inter-ethnic clan conflicts undermined the unity of the Assyrians. Before the outbreak of the First World War, the Russians intensified their contact, but the Ottomans had efficient spies and knew of the communications. Obviously worried, on 12 July 1914, Minister of the Interior Talaat Pasha telegraphed the provincial government of Mosul and ordered a report on the 'Nestorians' – how many they were, where they were settled, what their political orientation was and what steps the provincial governor considered appropriate.³

After weeks of border skirmishes along the Iranian border, the Ottoman Empire commenced formal hostilities with the Russian Empire in November 1914. Although Iran declared neutrality, the Ottoman military plans included a violation of Iranian territory in order to encircle the Russians and seize the oilfields at Baku. This manoeuvre involved the invasion of the north-western border district of Urmia, which had a large number of Armenian, Assyrian and Chaldean settlements. On the eve of war, as an important matter of security, Minister of the Interior Talaat Pasha sent a decree to the province of Van to deport the Assyrians from the Ottoman side of the border. His order of 26 October 1914 stated:

The position of the Nestorians has always remained dubious in the eyes of the government on account of their predisposition to be influenced by foreigners and to act as a channel and an instrument for them. Because of the operation and efforts in Iran, the importance of the Nestorians to the government has increased. Especially those who are found at our border area with Iran, because of the government's lack of trust ... [they will be punished by their] deportation and expulsion from their locations to appropriate such provinces as Ankara and Konya, to be transferred in a dispersed fashion so that henceforth they will not be together *en masse* and be settled exclusively among Muslim people, and in no location to exceed twenty dwellings.⁴

The Assyrians resisted deportation, and confrontations with civil and military authorities continued throughout the autumn and winter of 1914–15. Massacres of villagers were carried out as an instrument to

terrify the population into fleeing across the border into the part of Iran occupied by Russia. Some of the leaders responded by activating the provisions of their agreement with the Russians for mutual help. On the Iranian side of the border, the Russians organized an Assyrian self-defence militia, armed with army-surplus rifles, and gave them some training (Matveev and Mar-Yukhanna 1968; Genis 2003). The Christian militias existed up to New Year's Day 1915, when a makeshift Ottoman army under the provincial governor of Van, Jevdet Bey, rushed into the Urmia district to fill a vacuum of power as the Russians pulled back their troops to face an offensive in the southern Caucasus. The Ottomans occupied the district until May 1915. During the occupation, numerous atrocities were committed against those Armenians, Assyrians and Chaldeans who had not managed to flee. Returning Russian soldiers discovered a huge massacre of 707 Armenian and Assyrian civilian males in the village of Haftevan (near Salamas) when they arrived on 10 March 1915. Reports of similar atrocities in this and other places came from American and French missionaries who had remained in Iran to care for refugees seeking asylum in mission complexes (Toynbee and Bryce 2000). The Iranian government also informed foreign embassies of the atrocities (Empire de Perse 1919). Alarmed by these reports, the governments of Great Britain, France and Russia issued a joint statement published in major newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the London-based *Times* on 24 May 1915 declaring that in consideration of the Ottoman 'crimes against humanity and civilization ... all members of the Turkish government ... together with its agents implicated in the massacres' will be held personally responsible and punished (Gaunt 2006). This warning was proclaimed on 24 May, just at the official start of the anti-Armenian deportations inside Turkey, and had no effect there. Inside Iran, the Russian army, led by Russian-Armenian generals and supported by local Armenian and Assyrian volunteers, defeated troops under General Halil, who retreated into the Hakkari mountains. The defeated Ottoman army withdrew deep into Turkish territory, destroying whatever Christian communities they happened to come into contact with, most notoriously slaughtering the Armenian and Chaldean populations of the towns of Bashkala, Siirt and Bitlis. A Venezuelan mercenary in Ottoman service witnessed these events (Nogales 1926). It has to be said that the victorious army manned by Armenian and Assyrian volunteers was no better disciplined than the Ottoman, and it took revenge by pillaging Muslim villages, slaughtering the men and raping their women. The Russian civil authorities constantly complained about the atrocities committed by these soldiers and their allies during punitive raids (Holquist 2013: 347–348).

The most important assistance given to the Russians was during the Turkish bombardment of the Armenian quarters in the town of Van, which began on 20 April 1915. Assyrian warriors joined forces with a Russian detachment, which had rushed to relieve the Armenians. During this campaign, in mid-May the Assyrian warriors fought against and stopped General Halil's army, which had intended to reinforce the Turkish troops in Van. Of course, the Turks considered this an act of revolt, even though it was devised as a tactical protective measure. This defiance resulted in a concentration of civil and military might for the purpose of punishing the Assyrians. The governor of Mosul, Haydar Bey, was granted extraordinary powers to invade the Hakkari mountains, which had been transferred to his jurisdiction.⁵ Soldiers under Haydar Bey's command joined forces with several local Kurdish tribes to mount an attack from several sides. Although the Assyrians fought well, they were outnumbered, outgunned and had difficulty in finding supplies and food. They retreated high up into the mountains, where they had no chance of survival. Talaat Pasha ordered Haydar Bey to drive them out and concluded, 'Let them not return to their homelands'.⁶ By September, driven by desperation, most of the Assyrians from Hakkari had fled into Russian-occupied Iran, never to return, even though many of the males had volunteered for service in the Russian army in the hope of being able to return. Assyrian military units remained part of the Russian army until the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917, and after that time they continued to defend the area, retaining sporadic contact with the British. The Assyrian militia was still in place in 1918 when a Turkish army invaded present-day northern Iran and a great many Assyrians fled south to join up with the British in Iraq. During this mass flight on foot, many of the refugees were killed in attacks by Turkish units. In effect, by the end of the First World War the border zone between Iran and Turkey had been ethnically cleansed, an operation in which the Ottoman army played the most important role, but which had also been supported by local Kurdish tribes.

These examples of the activities of the Ottoman army in repressing and expelling Assyrians from their homes are documented in Ottoman sources because their resistance brought the matter to the attention of the highest civil and military authorities. However, many other Christian communities were haphazardly annihilated, for which there was felt to be no need to consult with the central government, and hence relevant archival documentation is unavailable. Throughout the province of Diyarbakir, Syriac villages were systematically destroyed at the same time as those of their Armenian neighbours. In many places, like the important administrative city of Harput, the Assyrians had assimilated

into Armenian society and spoke the Armenian language. One of the professors of Armenian literature at the Protestant college in Harput, Ashur Yusef, was a Syriac Protestant and he was murdered together with his colleagues in Diyarbakir in June 1915. The organizers of the massacres made little distinction between the two groups. For example, in the Beshire district east of Diyarbakir, although both the Assyrians and Armenians spoke Kurdish, they retained their different religions. In the town of Mardin, all of the Christian groups spoke a local variety of Arabic, particularly the large Catholic community into which were integrated the Armenian Catholic, Syriac Catholic and Chaldean congregations. Any violence targeting Armenians in such places as Harput, Mardin and Beshire became a general massacre of Christians rather than a specific Armenian massacre. Levene has proposed the term 'zone of violence' to describe eastern Anatolia during late Ottoman times. There was not one single Armenian genocide, but rather a 'series of genocidal and near genocidal massacres encompassing ... additional national groups' (Levene 1998: 394).

The Question of Genocide

Assyrians today usually refer to their genocide by the term *Sayfo* (also spelled *Seyfo*), Aramaic for 'sword'.⁷ The year 1915 has become the symbol of this genocide and has been referred to in terms of 'the year of the sword' (see more on this term in the chapter by Shabo Talay in this volume). *Sayfo* as a designation has been in oral use since the event itself and was obviously used even earlier as a metaphor for massacre. Nevertheless, in publications it has only been used since roughly the 1980s, when the first publications of witness testimonies and oral history appeared in Europe.⁸ Previously, in addition to *Sayfo*, the Arabic word for catastrophe, *nakba*, was used.⁹ In some areas the Turkish word *firman*, which means an 'official decree', was commonly used because many people in rural Anatolia, both victims and perpetrators, believed the sultan had ordered the massacres (Talay 2010).

Since the 1990s, Assyrian political activists have advanced the idea that what happened to their people in the First World War and its immediate aftermath can be considered genocide. Agitation and lobbying began against the background of increasing international recognition that what happened to the Armenians was genocide. Assyrian groups patterned their activities on the Armenians: commemorations were held on or around 24 April, memorials were raised throughout the world in localities where there were large diaspora communities, youth

groups created educational materials, organizations urged parliamentarians to submit bills for the recognition of Sayfo as genocide and, in a few cases such as in Sweden, such a bill was actually passed. In 2007 the International Association of Genocide Scholars issued a statement to the effect that what happened to the Assyrians was genocide. This activity of recognition began before there was much scientific research, so discussions of whether the facts fit any definition of genocide became a matter of choice within a 'black and white' dichotomy of cruel perpetrators against innocent victims.

There are many definitions of genocide, but nearly all see it as a systematic campaign organized by governments and their apparatuses to destroy targeted ethnic and religious groups. The UN convention of 1948 talks of full genocide but also refers to 'partial' genocide, in which a substantial part of a targeted population, but not all of it, is destroyed. Therefore, it is not dependent on the total eradication of the target. The concept of 'partial destruction' has not been sufficiently discussed. Genocide is directed at the destruction of a national group as a conscious community; it does not matter that some individuals survive if the community to which they had belonged no longer exists (Feierstein 2012). Genocide is not just the outright murder of a people; it can also take the form of forcing a people into conditions in which they cannot survive (ghettos, camps in the desert, death marches). Massacres are also combined with forced expulsion or acts of extreme terror to drive people to abandon their homes voluntarily. In this sense, it is close to 'ethnic cleansing'. The purpose is usually to win a piece of territory completely or nearly completely emptied of the target population.

The intention of the Ottoman government to remove the Assyrians from their homelands is not in doubt. The government definitely knew it was acting against populations that were not Armenians. In the documents cited in Turkish, the members of the Church of the East are called *Nasturi*, the members of the Syriac Orthodox Church are called *Süryani* and the Chaldeans are called *Keldani*. It is not a case of mistaken identity, except in those places where language assimilation with the Armenians had taken place. As mentioned above, Minister of the Interior Talaat Pasha expressed suspicions about the loyalty of 'Nestorians' in July 1914 and sent a deportation order to expel the Nestorians along the borderlands with Iran as early as October 1914. When they resisted, in July 1915 he ordered the army to drive them from the Hakkari mountains, never to return. In the case of Azakh, one of the last entrenched positions of Syriac defenders, Minister of War Enver ordered the suppression of the village using the 'utmost severity'.¹⁰ Talaat even sent a contingent of *mujaheddin* under his command to lend the siege a Muslim-Christian

twist. After the attack failed, Enver conferred with the Commander of the Third Army about returning to finish the job when a better opportunity should present itself. Other high-ranking Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) members were involved: Naci Bey had been the committee's Inspector General for Anatolia and both he and the provincial governor, Reshid Bey, were well-respected members of the Young Turks' old guard.

That Enver intended the destruction of Azakh and its defenders is beyond question. Because of the presence of German military advisors, these events came to the notice of the German government. Obviously that government understood that the task of the Ottoman army was to exterminate the defenders and therefore it insisted that no German soldiers should be involved.

Members of the Syriac Orthodox Church in Azakh and members of the Church of the East in Hakkari took up arms in order to confront the Ottoman civil and military authorities. Therefore, the Ottoman government officials were able to describe the actions they took against them as punitive measures against rebels and traitors. However, as the German consul in Mosul pointed out, they were simply trying to save themselves from certain annihilation or expulsion. This point seemed to have been recognized by the government as, on 25 December 1915, an order arrived in the eastern provinces bringing news of a change of policy. 'Instead of deporting all of the Syriac people found within the territory', they should be 'detained in their present locations'.¹¹ However, by that date most of the Christian heartland in the Mardin sub-district had been destroyed, with the exception of the defended villages, some families who had found asylum in monasteries and some isolated villages in forested areas. It was therefore an ongoing genocide that was only halted at the eleventh hour.

Another point that indicates the intention to annihilate all Christians in the eastern provinces is the way the Ottoman government turned a deaf ear to international criticism. Against the background of the atrocities committed against Armenians, Assyrians and Chaldeans in the Turkish-Iranian borderlands, the declaration of 24 May 1915 had no effect. Furthermore, German diplomatic protests decrying the atrocities of the governor of Diyarbakir, Reshid Bey, in instigating a general massacre of all Christians received only a *pro forma* response from the Ottoman government. Nevertheless, Germany did lodge a protest about the killing of more than four hundred Armenian, Syriac Catholic, Chaldean and Protestant leaders from Mardin and its vicinity on the night of 10–11 June 1915.¹² This had come to the attention of the German consul in Mosul who immediately informed his ambassador

and government. The German response was to insist that the universal massacre of Christians should be stopped and that Reshid be dismissed. Talaat telegraphed Reshid on 12 July saying that ‘measures adopted against the Armenians are under no circumstances to be extended to other Christians ... you are ordered to put an immediate end to these acts’.¹³ However, despite this warning, the general massacre of Christians did not stop, Reshid was not replaced and, at the end of his term of office in Diyarbakir, he was rewarded with the provincial governorship of Ankara. His closest ally in orchestrating the general massacres, his deputy-governor, Bedreddin Bey, took over his position. Whether or not Talaat’s telegram was genuine, or merely a ploy to appease the diplomats, is a matter of debate. Its importance lies in showing that Talaat was aware that Christians who were not Armenians had been arrested, tortured and murdered, and that he had not intervened to stop it. Certainly Reshid had a long-standing reputation for brutality and hostility towards Christians and this was one of the reasons the local Diyarbakir CUP group insisted on his appointment to replace an alleged too ‘Christian-friendly’ governor, Hamid, in March 1915 (Bilgi 1997).

Another indication of the occurrence of genocide is the high number of victims. In a rare show of inter-sectarian cooperation, in 1919 Assyrians of all denominations presented a petition to the Paris Peace Conference stating that altogether 250,000 of their number had been killed in Anatolia or Turkish-occupied Iran during the war. They calculated that this was about half of the original population. By 1922, at the Lausanne peace negotiations, they raised that number to 275,000. However, the delegate, Afram Barsoum, Archbishop of the Syriac Orthodox archdiocese in Syria, gave a lower figure of 90,000 for the Syriac Orthodox and 90,000 for the combined Church of the East and Chaldeans, resulting in a total of 180,000. In other words, the earliest stated numbers of victims range from as low as 180,000 to as high as 275,000. The accuracy of these figures is impossible to check. How they could obtain information from a decimated population that had been dispersed all over the world is also hard to understand. The various churches lacked their own precise statistics that would give an accurate starting point from which to calculate the percentage population loss. Most estimates from the immediate prewar years indicate a total Assyrian population ranging from 500,000 to 600,000 (Gaunt 2006: 19–28, 300–303). Given the nature of the peace process and the desire of the Christians to be compensated in proportion to the extent of their suffering, it would have been natural for them to give somewhat exaggerated figures. However, the estimate of 50 per cent is an overall figure and contemporary observers found much higher percentages in certain important localities. Jacques Rhétoré, a French

Dominican monk interned in Mardin from 1915 to 1916, recorded that in the sub-district of Mardin, 86 per cent of Chaldeans had disappeared along with 57 per cent of the Syriac Orthodox, 48 per cent of the Syriac Protestants and 18 per cent of the Syriac Catholics (Rhétoré 2005: 136).¹⁴ The manner in which people were murdered had been extreme in places and had been preceded by the gratuitous public humiliation of local leaders and their families. For instance, in Mardin on 10 June 1915, four hundred prisoners were paraded through the main street of the town in heavy chains. The deputy-governor of Diyarbakir and the chief of police organized the march. Many of the Christian leaders, particularly the heads of churches, displayed visible injuries caused by torture and beatings (Armale 1919: part 3 chapters 4–5; Rhétoré 2005: 72–74; Sarafian 1998: 264; Simon 1991: 65–71; Ternon 2002: 133, Gaunt 2006: 170–173). As they trudged through the centre of town, the Muslim population was encouraged to insult them, while the families of the victims were forbidden to leave their houses. Female Assyrian witnesses claimed sexual abuse, rape and other forms of gender-based atrocities (Naayem 1920 reveals many such cases).

In conclusion, a number of conditions make it possible to recognize the Sayfo as a genocide. Chief among them was the deep involvement of the civil and military commands of the Ottoman government in plans to target Assyrians of all denominations. Secondly, hundreds of thousands out of a relatively small population fell victim. Thirdly, the Assyrian homeland in Hakkari was completely destroyed and never re-established. Fourthly, the Syriac Orthodox were nearly wiped out and only saved by an order of December 1915 calling a temporary reprieve to the aggression. The Chaldeans had the best chance of survival as the majority of the members of this church lived in the southern provinces of Mosul, Bagdad and Basra, which were not part of the 1915 anti-Christian campaign. However, those Chaldeans who lived in the Anatolian province of Bitlis, particularly in or around the towns of Siirt and Cizre or in the Urmia district of Iran, were subject to great cruelty and had little chance of survival unless they had been able to flee beforehand.¹⁵

What Were the Causes?

Genocides are complex. There are usually multiple and entangled ideological, economic and social causes. The Assyrian case is no exception. There were geopolitical as well as regional and local causes over which the groups had little control. Alongside these were Turkish nationalistic

ideological causes and, finally, there were social and economic causes specific to the localities in which the target populations lived.

On a macro level, these peoples lived in a historically very unstable borderland. These regions are territories prone to ethnic and religious mass violence. Bartov and Weitz (2013) have identified what they term a geographic ‘shatterzone’ of extreme violence extending from the Baltic region of Northern Europe through Eastern Europe down to the Middle East. This ‘shatterzone’ emerged in the borderland friction between the German, Habsburg, Russian and Ottoman empires. To the cases described in this book can be added the fact that these Oriental Christian peoples were caught up in the additional friction between Turks, Iranians, Kurds and Arabs, all with their nascent national movements. In this type of violent territory, all people needed to be on their guard against personal attack. In a genocidal situation, even the target population might respond with violence and seek revenge.

A similar concept of a territory prone to persistent extreme religious or ethnic violence is Mark Levene’s idea of the ‘zone of genocide’, which he applies directly to eastern Anatolia in the period 1878–1923 (Levene 1998). The date 1878 refers to the Treaty of Berlin, which ended the Russo-Turkish War and provided for the appointment of foreign consuls inside Turkey to act as guardians of the rights of Armenians. Christian Gerlach’s (2006) term ‘extremely violent society’ is also relevant here. His concept seeks to avoid some of the pitfalls inherent in the term genocide – particularly that of the implied moral dichotomy of perpetrators and victims. The above-mentioned theories place extreme ethnic and religious violence within a particular type of disputed geography, creating a certain type of social structure – one in which there are persistent unresolved and long-standing ethnic conflicts. They also have the advantage of removing the role of complete innocence from the target population. In a zone of extreme violence, even the victims can be armed defenders.

Another high-level explanation comes from Donald Bloxham (2005), who emphasizes the perfidious influence of Great Power involvement as a background to genocide. The nineteenth-century rivalry known as the Great Game between Russia, Britain, Germany, Austria and France in bids to gain influence over the declining Ottoman Empire destabilized that country. The Great Powers became increasingly involved in the situation of the non-Muslim minorities and what today is called their human rights. Their not-so-altruistic involvement included plans for grabbing territory under the premise of protecting the non-Muslims. This outside interference created a backlash that put the minorities at risk of retribution through the connivance of officials. In 1908, the patriarch of the

Church of the East, Mar Shimun, begged the British consul in Van to stop protesting about the pillaging of Assyrian villages as the protests only made matters worse (Heazell and Margoliuth 1913: 205–8). French consuls at Diyarbakir were equally ineffectual, although they did document numerous cases of seizure of Christian property and unsolved murders and kidnappings (de Courtois 2004). During the First World War, the Russians and then the British promised the Assyrians that they would be granted independence if they participated in the struggle against the Ottomans. Despite the Assyrians siding with these powers, in the end their dreams were crushed, resulting in a justified feeling of betrayal (Stafford 1935; Malek 1935). The German intervention was connected with that country's need for a socially stable Turkey in order to benefit German economic interests. Consequently, it supported the idea of making Turkey homogeneous so as to rid itself of the (potential) internal conflicts caused by unassimilated minorities. At the outbreak of the world war, German diplomats and military advisors agreed to the deportation of the Armenians, even though they thought the measures unnecessarily cruel. And, as already mentioned, they protested when non-Armenians were made victims (Weitz 2013).

On the national level, there was an acute demographic crisis a few years after the Young Turk revolution of 1908. Turkey had to cede a large amount of territory in Europe through the Balkan Wars of 1912–13 and large waves of Muslim refugees streamed into Istanbul and western Anatolia. By and large, the refugees were rural families and needed farmland and places to live. The Minister of the Interior, Talaat, developed a scheme of demographic engineering that would disperse them in Anatolia to encourage the Turkification of those many Balkan refugees who were not already Turkish speaking. The refugees would be resettled in eastern Anatolia on land possessed by people suspected of disloyalty. The upshot was orders to move populations. The order to resettle the Assyrians of Hakkari was just one step in this greater scheme. New waves of Muslim refugees were created as people fled from front-line regions. During the world war, the Directorate for the Settlement of Tribes and Immigrants controlled the conditions and direction of resettlement (Akçam 2012). The forced removal of Christian farmers greatly facilitated the resettlement of Muslim refugees.

This general and national background intertwined with local factors to create a very violent situation. Among the local factors was the emergence of a provincial civil administration prone to violence against non-Muslims. Genocide in the Ottoman Empire was not accomplished in the set-up of a modern bureaucratic system as was the Jewish Holocaust, but depended instead mainly on the enthusiasm of brutal local leaders

who could build up an *ad hoc* organization of volunteer death squads, reinforced in places by pardoned criminals. The massacres were organized by a provincial committee that determined the times and places of depredations. In Diyarbakir, a political and administrative symbiosis could build upon an already-existing, fatal anti-Christian hostility alive among the Muslim population. Some of the highest administrators, like governor Reshid of Diyarbakir, belonged to the so-called *Teshkilat-i Mahsusa* (Special Organization), the combined espionage and assassination group of the CUP. To implement the planned eradications, local leaders and administrators created paramilitary militias under their own control.

The local political club of the Young Turks in Diyarbakir was dominated by the Piringçizâde clan, which had a history of violence against non-Muslims. They were close to the CUP leadership through their relative Ziya Gökalp, the principal ideologue and a member of the party's Central Committee. When Piringçizâde Arif was mayor of Diyarbakir, in 1895, he instigated a bloody pogrom against Armenian and Assyrian businesses, leading to more than a thousand deaths in the city and the destruction of eighty-five Assyrian villages in the vicinity (Gaunt 2013: 320). In 1908, Arif also ordered the slaughter of the non-Muslim Yezidis living to the west of Diyarbakir (Kaiser 2014). His son, Aziz Feyzi, became a delegate to the newly established National Assembly, where he was noted for his hostility towards the Armenian delegates. Allegedly he had assassinated Ohannes Kazazian from Mardin, his political rival in elections, in 1913 (Üngör 2011: 48). He was also instrumental in having Reshid Bey appointed governor of Diyarbakir in March 1915. Reshid brought with him a personal bodyguard of Circassian warriors and hitmen who became embroiled in all sorts of anti-Christian violence as well as in the assassinations of Muslim dissidents. Furthermore, the provincial administration created local militias of Muslim males exempted from conscription and they were based in the major towns, given military rifles and led by reserve officers. They made up a collection of death squads that could be rapidly deployed.

The politicians and governors of Diyarbakir may or may not have been Turkish nationalists, but they did take part in the plundering of Christian wealth and property. In Van province, where most of the members of the Church of the East in the Ottoman Empire lived, the governor was Jevdet Bey, a close relative of Minister of War Enver. Jevdet also had a private army composed of gendarmes and others whose activities were an embarrassment to the regular army. His anti-Christian hostility was unleashed in early 1915 when he was the acting commander of the Turkish army that invaded north-western Iran. The mass killing of

seven hundred Armenian and Assyrian men in Haftevan was reported to have been undertaken on his orders. He called his cut-throat private army the 'butcher battalion' (*kassablar taburu*). Jevdet can be seen as the initiator of the Armenian deportations by creating an atmosphere of panic by means of a series of reports of 'Armenian rebellions', which he sent to Enver throughout March and April 1915 (Gaunt 2006: 106–7). His forces fired the first artillery shells against the Ottoman Armenians when they began to bombard the Armenian quarters in Van on 20 April 1915.

Another local factor, which might not have caused the genocide but certainly contributed to its complexity and prevented stronger and more strategic resistance, was the lack of unity among the members of the Church of the East, Syriac and Chaldean churches. This disunity made possible incidents in which some Christian communities stood to one side as bystanders while their neighbours were massacred. The lack of a common, non-ecclesiastical identity was compounded by the instability of the major institutions – their churches. The Syriac Orthodox of Tur Abdin with numerous farm villages were embroiled in long-term conflict with the Syriac Orthodox patriarch based in Mardin. The authority of the patriarch of the Church of the East, Mar Shimun, was in question. One archdiocese joined the Russian Orthodox Church and the leaders of the Jilu tribe converted to Roman Catholicism. The Chaldeans were equally split and in some places cooperated with Armenian and Syriac Catholics in the use of church buildings. The instability of the churches was matched by the divisions created by the social structure, which was based on large clans in Tur Abdin, or on tribes in the Hakkari mountains. Clans and tribes were rivals. All of these persistent hostilities enabled the Ottoman authorities to play the game of 'divide and rule'. In Midyat, for instance, the Syriac Orthodox secular leadership was enticed by the municipal authorities to turn over the rival Syriac Protestant minority, who were said to be richer, to certain death. In Mardin, when the Syriac Catholic, Protestant and Chaldean prisoners were being sent to execution in June 1915, the Syriac Orthodox bribed their way to freedom. In Hakkari, when most of the other tribes united to fight the Turkish army, the Jilu tribe, whose leaders had just been assassinated on Mar Shimun's orders, declined to participate, and instead retreated into Iran. Efforts by the few Assyrian intellectuals in the different churches to unite their communities were to little avail (Gaunt 2013).

Many of the above-mentioned factors affected all non-Muslim minorities in Anatolia, particularly the Armenians. This would partially explain why Assyrians were caught up in a genocide despite not being clearly defined as a target, as the Armenians were. The same background factors

that were relevant to the extermination of the Armenians resulted in the partial genocide of the other Christian peoples. We are aware that the background causes enumerated here are descriptive factors. They do not actually explain why these groups were annihilated, not even when all these aspects are combined.

The genocide perpetrated against the various Assyrian denominations of northern Mesopotamia can be viewed from several perspectives, each of which is legitimate. One approach focuses only on the great catastrophe during the First World War, instigated by the Young Turk government and its extreme nationalist Committee of Union and Progress. This approach emphasizes the political ideology of the political leaders and their desire to 'Turkify' the country by eliminating all members of the population who were expected to resist. Indisputably, the main actors were Talaat, the Minister of the Interior, who orchestrated the genocide, and Enver, the Minister of War, who supplied the support of the army when needed. The second approach emphasizes the long-term escalation of anti-Christian violence from the mid-nineteenth century, culminating in the great annihilation of 1915, followed by continued persecution in Turkey and even in the new successor state of Iraq. The first approach, with a short historical background, emphasizes the role of the Young Turk government in radicalizing politics and systematically orchestrating the murders, and places them in the context of modern *political genocides*. This point of view stresses the importance of ideology and nationalism to mass politics and of gaining popular support for the repression of minorities (Mann 2005). The second approach, with a longer historical background, places the killing inside an increasingly lethal local inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflict, and puts it in the context of *colonial genocides*, pushing native peoples off their land. The genocide can be seen as an extreme form of a 'culture of violence', and some would call it genocide 'by attrition' (Fein 1997).

In this context, the slow evolution approach as an explanation of the genocide distinguishes the following phases. Sporadic but later on recurring bloody anti-Christian pogroms commenced in the mid-nineteenth century and as a consequence of which non-Armenian Christians were also increasingly caught up in the Armenian Question. This phase continued in varying intensity up to the outbreak of the First World War. The second phase began at the time of Turkey's mobilization at the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 until the spring of 1915. In the mobilization phase, adult men were drafted into slave labour battalions on the pretext of suspicions about disloyalty. Searches for suspected army deserters in Christian quarters of towns led to indiscriminate violence and the arrests of Christian leaders. The third phase,

from May 1915, was marred by an outburst of general genocidal atrocities over a wide area, characterized by mass executions, destruction of entire districts, death marches and rape warfare, continuing unabated until November 1915. The fourth phase was that of the mopping-up operations, in which the last survivors were pushed out of Hakkari and the Urfa area and revenge was exacted on those who had led village defences, and the final expulsion of the Syriac Orthodox patriarch from Turkey in 1924. In this volume both short-term and long-term perspectives are represented.

Roots and Settlement

The various Syriac-speaking church communities are indigenous to eastern Anatolia and Mesopotamia and most of their members trace their heritage to the Assyrians, Arameans and/or Chaldeans. Ethnically, they are probably a composite of people who converted to Christianity in the first centuries AD, long before its acceptance by the Roman Empire. They came to be known as Syrian(/c) Christians; *Suryoye/Suryaye* in Syriac Aramaic. Originally, they spoke a variety of Aramaic local dialects and used Syriac as their liturgical language. This hybrid ancient past is very much reflected in the hotly disputed discourses about their origin, especially within the group itself in its diaspora communities. Leaving aside what happened in the past, contemporary identity debates in the diaspora should be understood from the present-day perspective of the context of having to establish a new life in secular states in which religious identity is seen as a private matter and other forms of identification (such as ethno-national) have become dominant instead. This process of redefining the collective identity of the group concerned in the diaspora has been discussed in several studies (Deniz 1999; Cetrez 2005; Atto 2011). For a better understanding of the present ethno-politics in a historical context, it is necessary to reflect briefly on the divisions within the church in the early centuries of Christianity.

The first main split within Syriac Christianity goes back to the fifth century AD, and emanated from various inner-Christian conflicts and splits over sophisticated theological points dealing with the nature of Christ. In 410, the Christians in Persia proclaimed their independence from the patriarch of Antioch and the emperor in Constantinople at a time when war was raging between Byzantium and Persia. The church leadership of the Christians in Persia needed to adopt an independent position in relation to the Byzantine Church if it was to win greater acceptance from the Persian rulers. Thereafter, it became known as the

Church of the East.¹⁶ This church has also been known under the name East Syrian Church, in contrast to the West Syrian Church, which grew inside the Byzantine Empire.

Theological debates in the Byzantine Empire resulted in the establishment of various Christian churches of the Near East and the Mediterranean. Archbishop Nestorius's ideas about his concept of Christology and the Virgin Mary were declared heretical at the Synod of Ephesus (431). When as a consequence of this he settled in Persia, he gained ascendancy in the recently established Church of the East, which was already independent and chose to adopt a Dyophysite Christology, which was closely, but not exactly, related to Nestorius's position. This is the reason the Church of the East has also been known by the erroneous name Nestorian Church, after Nestorius. Throughout Ottoman official documents and censuses, its members are referred to as *Nasturiler*. The Church of the East was the first institution in modern times to use the term Assyrian to express its collective identity (Surma 1920; Coakley 1992).

In the sixth century, the West Syriac Church continued to oppose the Chalcedonian Creed to which the Roman rulers had committed themselves. The persecution by these rulers forced the Syriac Orthodox hierarchy and monastic orders to seek to escape the influence of the emperor. Jacob Baradaeus (Bishop of Edessa, ca 500–578) played a fundamental role in the setting up of a new, independent, stable organizational structure for the Syriac Orthodox Church. Therefore, the Syriac Miaphysites have erroneously been called Jacobites. In official Ottoman documents they are sometimes referred to as *Süryaniler* and sometimes as *Yakubiler*.

Having been pushed to the periphery, Syriac-speaking Christians gradually began to express their own traditional cultural identity. In retrospect, it is possible to see that the divisions in the church were also heavily influenced by non-theological struggles: political (mainly rivalry between Byzantium and Persia), ethnic, social and geographical, not to mention personal antagonisms between the clergy (Rompay 1997).

With the spread of Islam throughout the Middle East, Syriac Christians hoped they would escape the persecution to which they had been subjected under the Byzantines. In many places, the Christians formed a majority, although their rulers were Muslims. Under Arab Muslim rule, all Christians acquired the status of *dhimmi* and no major difference was made between the various Christian sects. As the non-Muslim subjects of an Islamic state, they lived under Sharia law, and had the right of residence and protection from the ruler in return for the payment of a special tax (*jizya*). Moreover, they had to abide by

certain rules that did not apply to Muslims. However, centuries after the initial Islamic conquest, the combined negative consequences of the failure of the Crusades and the Mongol invasions (Bagdad was taken in 1258 and razed by Timur Lenk in 1401) brought near total destruction to the indigenous Christian communities of Mesopotamia. By the fifteenth century, the once-flourishing indigenous Christians found themselves a decimated minority.

In their subsequent steady decline, the Oriental churches splintered even more as they struggled with internal and external strife. The Church of the East became a local church in the vast isolation of the Hakkari mountains and, after a while, the office of patriarch became hereditary to the Shimun dynasty, whose base was in an inaccessible Hakkari mountain hamlet. In the mid-sixteenth century, a group within the Church of the East split off and created a separate church. Its base became the provinces that make up Iraq, with enclaves inside Turkey and Iran. It sought union with the Vatican and was accepted under the name of the Chaldean Catholic Church and the leader was termed the Catholicos-Patriarch of Babylon. Throughout, the Ottomans designated the members of this Church *Keldaniler*. In the second half of the seventeenth century, under the influence of French missionaries, a group of Syriac Orthodox split away and established the first Syriac Catholic patriarchate in Aleppo. Later Protestant churches were also founded.

Each church had a core area in which nearly everyone was a member of the same church. The Syriac Orthodox core area was in the southern part of Diyarbakir province, with concentrations around the market towns of Mardin and Midyat as well as in the large rural district of Midyat (known as Tur Abdin) consisting of about a hundred villages. There were outlying enclaves near the towns of Harput, Adiyaman and Urfa. The core area of the Church of the East was in the remote Hakkari mountains, forming the Turco-Iranian frontier. It also had an enclave around the Iranian administrative town of Urmia. The majority of the Chaldeans lived in Mosul province, with enclaves around the Turkish towns of Cizre and Siirt and Salamas in Iran.

All of these sects were small and their leaders bitterly reviled their opponents as dangerous heretics, an attitude that promoted sectarian exclusion and effectively hindered the growth of a cross-denominational collective identity or common national movement. However internally important these divisions were, outsiders paid little attention to them. In the face of rising Turkish nationalism and Islamic radicalism in the late 1800s, the term *gavur* (infidel) for all non-Muslims became a general part of verbal abuse in Muslim discourse, blurring the fine distinctions

between the various Assyrian denominations and even those with the Armenians and Greeks.

In the mid-nineteenth century, lethal conflicts between the Assyrians and Kurds began when Kurdistan was rocked by a confrontation between the Ottoman government and Badr Khan, the ambitious Kurdish emir of Bohtan. Cizre, the town in which he resided on the Tigris River, had many Christian settlements in its immediate neighbourhood. Then, suddenly, a civil war erupted in the nearby Emirate of Hakkari, which had been split over a disputed succession to its leadership. The upshot was a breach between the Kurds and the Assyrians. Badr Khan used the problem caused by the dispute as a pretext to launch an invasion targeting the Assyrians who were on the losing side. An initial military campaign in the summer of 1843 singled out the Assyrians for massacre and European newspapers reported that an estimated seven to ten thousand were killed. Hundreds were captured and sold as slaves. A second invasion in 1846 destroyed any Assyrian village that had been previously overlooked. It is a matter of speculation as to why Badr Khan targeted the Christians, but he was known for his Muslim piety. His operations were not confined to Hakkari, which lay east of Bohtan, but also encompassed much of Tur Abdin, which was situated to the west. Bowing to British pressure, the Ottoman government finally put a halt to Badr Khan's activities (Hirmis 2008; Gaunt 2012; Gaunt 2015b).

Controlling peripheral areas was a chronic problem confronting all Ottoman governments. Centrally appointed provincial governors were underpaid and quickly slipped under the thumbs of local clans and their interests. State finances were so strapped that it proved impossible to station regular troops in the area on a permanent basis (Hartmann 2013). Therefore, the state compromised with local power holders, particularly the Kurdish emirs and the urban notables. The Ottomans adopted a policy of binding the loyalty of selected Kurdish tribes to the sultan. One fateful step in the 1880s was the establishment of irregular Kurdish cavalry regiments (*Hamidiye Alayları*) on the same model as the notorious Russian Cossacks. In return for loyalty to the sultan, these tribes received a special extra-legal status and could behave with impunity. The chief was given a military officer's rank and the warriors were supplied with uniforms and military arms. These regiments proved a highly disruptive factor to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. As military regiments, they were outside the jurisdiction of the civil authority and, as irregular troops, they were beyond normal bounds of military discipline (Klein 2011). Their activities in the borderland region wrecked the delicate balance of power between the Kurds and the Assyrians (see Gaunt's chapter in this volume).

In the late Ottoman period, politically motivated persecution focused on the relatively strong Armenian nationalist movement. Several Armenian political parties worked underground to achieve co-determination in eastern Anatolia, and a small number of revolutionaries struggled for total independence and in their campaign committed occasional acts of violence. In response, Sultan Abdulhamid sought and found enthusiastic support from latent Islamist forces. In 1895 and 1896, riots directed against Armenians broke out in many towns and Assyrians were sucked into these events haphazardly, even though they had no political movement themselves. In November and December 1895, mobs destroyed Christian homes and shops, over a thousand were murdered in Diyarbakir and an untold number were killed in Harput. Most victims were Armenians, but hundreds of Assyrians were killed and many Assyrian villages were plundered. As Uğur Ümit Üngör points out in his contribution to this volume, the victimhood of the Assyrians was almost always eclipsed by the greater interest given to the plight of the Armenians. It has required painstaking research to rediscover the Assyrian genocide behind the Armenian genocide.

Although general anti-Christian violence grew steadily in the final years of the Ottoman Empire, violence specifically targeting Assyrians had been common for centuries. The motives for the violence were complex, but included a lethal mix of the land hunger of Kurdish nomadic tribes, the urgent need to find homes for Muslim refugees streaming in after the defeats in the Balkan Wars of 1912–13, newly radicalized Turkish political and cultural nationalism and, on top of all that, popular religious hatred which the authorities found easy to manipulate. The Assyrian Christians were deeply divided – isolated from each other by denomination, distance and dialects. These divisions prevented any unified resistance, but the administration of the Ottoman government nonetheless depicted them as dangerous insurgents threatening the very existence of the nation.

At the end of the First World War, most of eastern Anatolian Turkey had been cleansed of Oriental Christians. There were a few Assyrian exceptions: some Tur Abdin villages had been passed over and some refugees had been permitted to return from the Arab provinces to which they had fled by local Kurdish *aghas*. Other refugees made their way to Europe (particularly France) or the United States of America. Tens of thousands of survivors were scattered in refugee camps in the Caucasus states, which were later part of the Soviet Union, and in the emerging countries of Iraq, Lebanon and Syria. Their leaders were not able to do much for them. As the chapter by Naures Atto and Soner O. Barthoma reveals, although the Syriac Orthodox patriarch did everything in his

support – including expressing full loyal support for the new political line of the Turkish governing elite and downplaying the genocide – he was forced to leave Turkey in 1924 by Atatürk. Thereafter, the new Patriarchal See was established in Homs in Syria (1933). Jan van Ginkel focuses on the role that one church leader played during the time of genocide. He asks such questions as: what was the response of the church leaders during the genocide itself and later? How did the genocide influence the behaviour of religious leaders after the event? How did the community respond to the behaviour of their secular and religious leaders? In his chapter, he introduces a new, more or less forgotten church leader from that time, Mor Dionysius ‘Abd an-Nur Aslan, Metropolitan of Harput, Homs and Diyarbakir, to illustrate some aspects of these questions.

The Aftermath of the Sayfo

After the First World War, the allied victors met at the Paris Peace Conference (1919) to lay down the terms for the defeated powers, among them the once mighty but by then long-crumbling Ottoman Empire. The terms were quite severe and the vanquished empires were carved up to make new states based on the principle of the rights of nationalities to independence. In the midst of negotiations, a large but uninvited group turned up calling itself the Assyro-Chaldean delegation, claiming authority to speak for what they called the ‘Assyro-Chaldean nation’. To complicate matters, other Assyrian groups turned up, one claiming to speak for the Assyrians of Persia, another for the Assyrians of Transcaucasia (Gaunt 2013). All told, these rival delegates hailed from many places – the United States, Russia, Iran, Lebanon and Turkey – and had had different experiences during the war. Most delegates had been born inside the Ottoman, Persian or Russian empires. Those who lived outside the war area had little direct knowledge of the destruction, but had high hopes for independence. The delegates told a remarkable tale: their people formed Christian minorities which for centuries had been dominated and persecuted by Muslim majorities. They insisted that they had been promised their own country, first by Russia and then by Great Britain, provided they joined them in fighting against the Ottoman army. Some of them had done so, particularly those who lived along the Turkish-Persian border. Now their representatives turned up in Paris expecting to collect their reward. Their motive for fighting the Turkish army was to defend their homes from ethnic cleansing and to avert aggression. The British made many promises of independence.

The Balfour Declaration made to Jewish leaders assigned them a homeland in Palestine and Sheriff Hussein of Mecca was promised Arab independence in return for launching a revolt. But the Assyrians lacked solid proof that similar oral promises made by middle-ranking officers were the official standpoint of the British government. A number of diplomats and military officers did give testimonies that such promises had been made, but they were not confirmed by the British government. Similar promises of independence made by Tsarist Russia were of course worthless after the Bolshevik Revolution. Although they included many influential public figures, supporters of the Assyrians in Britain lobbied unsuccessfully for those whom they called ‘our smallest ally’ (Wigram 1920, Bentinck 1924).¹⁷

Far from all of the Assyrians had joined the allies in military campaigns – fighting was mostly confined to the tribes living on the Turkish side of the border and the village militias armed by the Russians on the Iranian side of the border (Holquist 2015). They had been the target of persecution and violence for a long time and their plight had been exacerbated after the Young Turk revolution of 1908. Prewar Ottoman violations of the Iranian border were daily occurrences and ambitions were clear about annexing territory where Turkish speakers lived. For this reason, the Assyrians maintained contacts with representatives of Tsarist Russia in order to discuss the possibilities of Russian protection (Lazarev 1964; Matveev and Mar-Yukhanna 1968; Hellot-Bellier 2014). Apologists for the decision to rid Turkey of Assyrians usually generalize by arguing that because the Assyrians took up arms against the government, full military suppression and ethnic cleansing was their due reward (see the chapter by Abdulmesih BarAbraham in this volume). For Turkish apologists, the issue of resistance is – no matter how limited and unsuccessful – the main legitimation for Ottoman state aggression. However, under no circumstances are states allowed to annihilate an entire population simply because it refuses to comply with a hostile government order to vacate their ancestral homes.

The conflicting claims of the various Assyrian delegates to the peace conferences led to deep disappointment. The Syriac Orthodox Archbishop of Syria, Afram Barsoum, demanded the independence of the provinces of Diyarbakir, Bitlis, Harput and Urfa – a region where a majority of Syriac Orthodox lived – but he did not include the Hakkari mountains or Urmia. Representing the most extreme claim, Joel Werda, an Assyrian-American journalist born in Iran, called for the rebirth of the ancient Assyrian Empire extending from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea. He illustrated his journal, *Izgadda: Persian American Courier*, with a map showing this ‘new Assyria’. His group

made claims for Iranian territory, something the Peace Conference refused to discuss since Iran had been neutral. Furthermore, many of the territorial demands clashed with the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which divided a large part of the Middle East between Britain and France. Some Assyrians curried favour with the French, others with the British.

The Assyro-Chaldean delegation was never officially recognized and therefore had no authority to plead its case before the Peace Conference. Some of the delegates did manage to obtain private audiences with the British diplomat Robert Vansittart and Philip Kerr, Lloyd George's private secretary. One very active Assyrian delegate, A.K. Yousef, a doctor in the US army although born in Harput, tried to encourage the delegation to coordinate its efforts with the Armenian delegations, but to no avail. The Assyrian voices were submerged in a cacophony of similar demands, often for the same territory, from other larger and therefore more politically 'valuable' nationalities, such as the equally victimized Armenians and the Kurds. However, all of these conflicting nationality claims eventually came to nothing. Neither the Assyrians, Armenians nor the Kurds were rewarded with parts of the Ottoman lands. Relatively vague statements of the recognition of a need for the special protection of the Christian minorities were made in the first peace treaty dictated in the Parisian palace of Sèvres in 1920, and there was mention of possible Kurdish and Armenian states. However, that treaty was never ratified and by 1922 the Turkish war of independence had created a completely new situation. A state of Kurdistan had been proposed at Sèvres, in which the Assyrians would become a protected minority. Nonetheless, even these weak expressions of support vanished into thin air in the final treaty negotiated with the new Republic of Turkey at Lausanne in 1922–23. Thereafter, European awareness of the destitution of the Assyrians faded as the survivors were dispersed to all corners of the globe.

In 1933, a new crisis drew international concern to the Assyrians. The British mandate in Iraq was drawing to a close. In the new states of Syria and Iraq, the British mandatory administration had actively recruited Assyrian warriors into special military detachments named Levies and used them to put down Kurdish and Arab rebellions, which caused considerable ill will among the new Iraqi rulers. The League of Nations recognized that they ran the risk of massacre once Iraq became independent. Various projects for resettlement in other countries saw the light of day, but none came to fruition. After the British relinquished their mandate and Iraq became independent, the Iraqi army took revenge and targeted Assyrian settlements, the largest Simele, with a series of massacres in August 1933. Many Assyrians then fled from Iraq

to Syria. Raphael Lemkin had collected clippings of newspaper articles dealing with these attacks in preparation for his ongoing, worldwide comparative research on genocide.

New Results

One of the intentions of this volume is to stimulate researchers working on the Sayfo to strike out in new directions. In several instances, this has meant focusing on local studies rather than searching through the political statements of high-ranking politicians to try to discover the intentions of the Young Turk government. One local study has the added importance of highlighting the situation of women during the massacres. In her chapter, Florence Hellot-Bellier deals with the abduction, rape and forced conversion of Assyrian women by Muslim men in the region of Urmia, and attempts by the Assyrians to protect themselves from Muslim violence. Systematic rape is not included as a criterion in the 1948 United Nations convention on punishing and preventing genocide, but it has been increasingly included in legal cases as a condition calculated to destroy a national group (Stigmayer 1995). There are widespread accusations of rape warfare in the contemporary testimonies of survivors.

Other contributions to this volume describe and analyse previously unknown or little-used sources. Sebastian Brock takes up a recently discovered colophon in a liturgical manuscript which gives an account of mass killings of Assyrians in the Mardin area. It was written in the Zafaran Monastery, and he compares it with another source, that of Qarabashi, from the same monastery (Qarabashi 1997). Simon Birol interprets an epic poem in the classical Syriac language written by Gallo Shabo, who was the leader of a village in Tur Abdin which managed to defend itself successfully against the assaults of Turkish troops and Kurds. One key explanation offered by Gallo Shabo for what happened to his people is God's punishment for their sins.

One very important field of research is the consequences of genocide for the families of the victims and the efforts of the survivors to commemorate their victimization. This research goes in two directions. One leads to the psychological effects of collective trauma. The other leads to efforts to spread knowledge and to have the genocide recognized and acknowledged. Taking the first line of reasoning, Önvér Cetrez applies psychological categories of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder to determine the degree to which the Assyrian community has been marked by internal dissent and distrust of outsiders. He advances the idea that

present-day Assyrians suffer from the death of time, that is, they are unable to distinguish between today and what happened in the past.

Finally, several of our contributors deal with the international repercussions of genocide in the form of pressure put on the governments of the countries in which they now live as citizens by the Assyrian diaspora to officially acknowledge that these peoples were victims of genocide. Throughout the Western world, parliaments are being asked to make declarations recognizing that inside the Ottoman Empire the Assyrian, Armenian and Greek peoples were victims of genocide. This is not a demand usually placed on the agenda of a government or a parliament, and deliberations are not always fruitful. The Republic of Turkey has invested enormous resources in denying that anything criminal was perpetrated against the Assyrians. Racho Donef describes such denial activities produced by the recently created Assyrian section of the Turkish Historical Society. The aim of this new section is to challenge the Assyrian claims. As a rule, this is done by casting doubt on the statistics presented and by claiming that the testimony of survivors is flawed and therefore inadmissible. Abdulmesih BarAbraham describes the key arguments employed by Turkish government officials when denying genocide. He also makes an analysis of several recent 'denialist' publications by the Turkish Historical Society. Christophe Premat, a political scientist, compares how the French and the Swedish parliaments have dealt with diaspora demands for the recognition of genocide. His study shows that the larger the group is, and the more votes it can muster, the greater the possibility of getting a recognition bill passed.

The purpose of this volume is to initiate further research on the Sayfo, as the results have led to more burning issues. Foremost is the role of the Assyrian religious and political leadership, that is, to explain the contacts between the Assyrians and the Russians and British before, during and after the First World War and to explain the degree to which some of the religious leaders were collaborating with the Turkish authorities both during and after the war – whether out of necessity to avoid worse, or otherwise. How much of a role did personal rivalry between the leaders play in the failure of the Assyrians to develop a united resistance? There is an acute need to recover documentation, particularly from the archives and libraries of the religious institutions of Assyrians. There should be plenty of material in the correspondence between the patriarchs and the Ottoman authorities. Moreover, there should be primary documents used by the Assyro-Chaldean delegation to the Peace Conference in its estimation of the total number of victims. Much more effort needs to be exerted to clarify the ambiguity of the CUP government's reaction when it realized that Assyrians were

caught up in a persecution that outwardly targeted only Armenians. How and why were the two groups conflated as enemy targets? Hardly anyone has yet touched on the impact of the Sayfo on the socio-economic position of Assyrians in the post-genocidal period as a consequence of the confiscation of their property. Furthermore, how has the Sayfo affected institutions like their churches and secular organizations, their emigration, their future orientation and their relationship with their Muslim neighbours? What forms of collective trauma are to be found in the post-genocide period and how are Sayfo memories transmitted and reconstructed? How has the Sayfo affected different fields of art, including the disappearance of some, and how is it expressed in art created by post-genocide Assyrian generations? What are the effects of the Sayfo on language and culture? These and many other questions raised by this book should be on the agenda for future study.

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Notes

1. Minister of Interior to governor of Van province, 26 October 1914, the President's Ottoman Archive, Istanbul (BOA) DH. ŞFR 46/78.

2. Talaat to the Directorate of General Security for the Eastern Provinces, 25 December 1915, BOA DH. ŞFR 57/112, as cited in Akçam (2012: xx).
3. BOA DH. ŞFR 42/263, as cited in Akçam (2012: xx).
4. Minister of Interior to governor of Van province, 26 October 1914, BOA DH. ŞFR 46/78.
5. Ministry of the Interior to Mosul *vilayet*, 7 June 1915, BOA DH. ŞFR 53/276.
6. Talaat to *valis* of Mosul and Van, 30 June 1915, BOA DH. ŞFR 54/240.
7. Smith (1903: 376) translates the Syriac *Mawto dsayfo* as ‘death by the sword’.
8. Julius Yesu’ Cicek, *Ktobo d-Seyfe* (1981) is one of the first publications to use Sayfo.
9. See the witness testimony of Ishaq Armale, in *Al-Qusara fi nakabat al-nasara* [1919] 1970. During the war he was secretary to the Syriac Catholic Archbishop of Mardin.
10. Enver to Third Army Command, 27 November 1015. ATASE (Turkish Military Historical Archive, Ankara) Kol.: BDH, Kls.: 81, Dos.: 81/, Fih. 35-14. Reprinted in Gaunt 2006 482–483.
11. Talaat to the Directorate of General Security for the Eastern Provinces, 25 December 1915, BOA DH. ŞFR 57/112, as cited in Akçam (2012: xx).
12. According to Rhétoré (2005), 410 persons: 230 Armenian Catholics, 113 Syriac Catholics, 30 Chaldeans and 27 Protestants. Somehow, 85 Syriac Orthodox males already imprisoned managed to get released (Gaunt 2006: 170–73).
13. Holstein to German Embassy, 10 July 1915; German Ambassador to Minister of the Interior Talaat, 12 July 1915, in Lepsius (1919: 101–3). Talaat to Reshid, 12 July 1915, in Turkey General Directorate of Ottoman Archives (1995: 75), and BOA DH. ŞFR 54/406.
14. For other local estimates, see Gaunt (2006: 300–303).
15. From a legal perspective, the Sayfo also meets the criteria mentioned in the Memorandum of the International Centre for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) on the *Applicability of the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide to Events which Occurred during the Early Twentieth Century*. 1 January 2002. The memorandum deals specifically with the Armenian issue. Access through www.ictj.org/publications.
16. Today this church has two patriarchates and two different names: Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East (largest) and the Ancient Holy Apostolic Catholic Church of the East.
17. The Petition of the Persian Assyrians to the Peace Conference (June 1919), a copy of which can be found in the Hoover Library, elaborates on the numerous promises made by British, Russian and French military officers and diplomats; some of the battles are described in Eva Haddad (1996).

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