On 23 May 1915, the Ottoman Interior Minister Mehmed Talaat Pasha decreed the integral deportation of all Armenians to the Syrian desert. Two days later in the remote province of Diyarbekir, governor Dr. Mehmed Reshid organized the destruction of the Armenian elite by ordering the execution of 807 notables. The victims were handcuffed, sailed down the Tigris to a gorge, moored, stripped of their assets and clothes, and murdered with daggers and axes. On 30 May the process was repeated with 674 Diyarbekir Armenians. The destruction of the elite was followed by that of the general Armenian population, which in the summer of 1915 developed into perhaps the most ruthless genocidal process of all the Ottoman provinces.1

This qualitative characterization of the genocide in Diyarbekir can be complemented with a quantitative component. The recent publication of Talaat Pasha's “Black Book” has reignited the debate on the quantitative aspects of the deportation and destruction process and has shed light on this question.2 The book is based on Talaat's handwritten notebook that was kept by his widow and given to the Turkish journalist Murat Bardakçı in 1982, and charts the statistics of the deportations per province.3 It answers some of the most fundamental questions about the Armenian genocide, but also conjures other pertinent questions. For example, the statistics clearly demonstrate what historians have been suggesting for some time now: the overall destruction process manifests a discrepancy between the western and eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire. The death rates in the eastern provinces are higher than that of the western provinces. For example, whereas the deportation and destruction of Armenians in Diyarbekir was nearly total (97%), in Konya province this proportion was 61%. How can this difference be accounted for? Why was the Armenian genocide so intense in Diyarbekir?

This article will discuss some of the social processes and power structures that may have shaped this divergence in the destruction process. It will focus on how the local Young Turk elite in Diyarbekir managed their power bases, and suggest how did this may have affected the course of the Armenian genocide in that province. The emphasis will be placed on inter-ethnic relations in Diyarbekir on the eve of World War I.

**Local Young Turks in Diyarbekir province**

Deeply embedded within the social structure of Diyarbekir were overlapping and competing networks of rich, influential families of Muslim notables who had historically played the role of local power wielders in the city. These were for example the Cizrelizâde and Ekinci families, who lived near the square. The very powerful Pirinççizâde dynasty lived near the Great Mosque, the Ocak family near the Melik Ahmed Mosque, whereas the Cizrelizâde lived in a large mansion next to the Iskender Pasha Mosque. Their neighbors were the powerful Ekinci family on one side, and the Iskender Pasha family on the other. Several important Kurdish dynasties such as the Zazazâde and Cemilpaşazâde, as well as major chieftains from Hazro, Kulp and Lice had houses in the Ali Pasha neighborhood. They often commuted between their region of origin and the city. The Cemilpaşazâde were in particular important as pioneers of Kurdish nationalism. To various degrees, all these local elites were connected to each other through multiple familial ties: the Cizrelizâde were in-laws of the Yasinzâde, the Müftüzâde were related to and partly overlapped with the Direkçizâde, several women of the Zazazâde had married into the Gevranizâde family, the Cemilpaşazâde were relatives-in-law of the Azizoğlu, and the powerful Pirinççizâde dynasty was connected to most of these families through marital ties.

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5 Şeyhmus Diken, *İsyan Sürğünleri* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2005), pp.134-5, 204-5, 209.
The ebb and flow of Diyarbekir city’s politics was often decisive for provincial politics as well. The competition between these families could rise to boiling point as they engaged in fierce competition over access to local state resources. This often resulted in forms of corruption and nepotism, witnessed by the British traveller David Fraser, who argued in 1909 that in Diyarbekir “misgovernment is at its height, and within its walls there is neither justice for the righteous nor protection for the weak.”\(^6\) Competition within the urban landed notable class coupled with relatively weak central state authority produced these conditions.

Even in Diyarbekir, far away from the direct heat of the Balkan troubles, tensions between Muslims and Christians materialized. In the city, national discussions on identity and ideas on population politics had already fueled competition and conflict between the ethnically organized political factions. Well before the war, Müftüzâde Şeref Uluğ had proposed declaring an economic boycott against the “treacherous Armenians” in order to strengthen Muslim economic power.\(^7\) The Armenians of Diyarbekir, in their turn, were generally anti-Russian and many adhered to the Dashnaktsutiun party, which desired Armenian autonomy. Concretely, its program aimed at more freedom and more decentralization in the Ottoman administration of the eastern provinces, the introduction of Armenian as educational and official language, and an end to injustice, usurpation, and expropriation committed mostly by certain Kurdish tribes against (Armenian) peasants.\(^8\) Kurdish nationalism, though not as organized and established as its Armenian counterpart, also existed in the province. On 19 September 1908 Kurdish nationalists founded the Diyarbekir office of the ‘Kurdish Assistance and Progress Society’ in the city.\(^9\) According to its statutes, it aimed to observe the constitution, pursue the notion of Ottomanism, end tribal warfare, and maintain “harmony and good relations between their compatriots the Armenians, Nestorians, and other Ottoman subjects”.\(^10\)

The Committee of Union and Progress had not remained idle in Diyarbekir province either. The first CUP office in Diyarbekir was opened on 23 July 1908 by Ziyâ Gökalp, who after all was a native of the region, and was also its representative in the party’s Central Committee.\(^11\) Gökalp began publishing the newspaper *Peyman*, which adopted a relatively

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\(^8\) *Politisches Archiv Auswärtiges Amt* (henceforth PAAA), Holstein to Bethmann-Hollweg, 22 May 1913.


\(^10\) *Kürt Teavün ve Terakki Cemiyeti Nizamnamesi* (İstanbul: Kasbar, 1324), p.1, article 1.

modest tone and emphasized coexistence of the various Ottoman subjects. But after the catastrophic defeats of the Balkan wars the atmosphere changed and interethnic relations polarized. The CUP dictatorship exerted its influence in this province through a network of mainly urban Kurdish members. The most influential CUP members in Diyarbekir were those related to the wealthy and powerful Pirinççizâde dynasty, who owned large estates in the province, including the rice fields west of Diyarbekir city. Reportedly, the Pirinççizâde dynasty owned 30 villages in the vicinity of Diyarbekir city.

One of their kinsmen was deputy Aziz Feyzi (1879-1933), the son of Pirinççizâde Arif, who had adhered to the Kurdish Assistance and Progress Society. According to a German report, Feyzi had undertaken a study trip to Germany in 1911. On behalf of many other Diyarbekir notables, he vehemently protested in the Ottoman parliament against the proposed government plan of expropriating the powerful landowners, and in time Feyzi became a Young Turk hardliner. He had held fierce and hostile discussions with Armenian member of parliament Vartkes Serengulian (1871-1915), in which he accused Vartkes of Armenian separatist designs. He became more and more fanatic in his anti-Armenian sentiments, and reportedly had Ohannes Kazazian, a Catholic Armenian from Mardin and his political rival in the elections, assassinated in 1913. Given his reputation, Aziz Feyzi’s assignment to Diyarbekir caused unrest and anxiety among Armenian politicians there. Other CUP sympathizers in Diyarbekir were Pirinççizâde Sıdkı (Tarancı), Yasinzâde Şevki (Ekinci), his brother Yasinzâde Yahya (Ekinci), Müftüzâde Şeref (Uluğ), and less prominent others.

Polarization of inter-ethnic relations, 1913-14

The loss of the Balkans in 1913 reverberated throughout Ottoman society, including distant Diyarbekir. As if that had not been traumatic enough, vague talks of and slow but deliberate

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14 PAAA, R14084, Mutius to Bethmann Hollweg, 14 June 1914.
15 Tanrı Zafer Tunaya, Türkiye’de Siyasal Partiler (İstanbul: İletişim, 1997), vol.1, pp.600-1.
18 Malmisani, Kürt Teavün, p.41.
steps towards a reform plan to ‘solve’ the Armenian question, by which European ‘inspectors’
would be appointed to ensure more Armenian and Kurdish autonomy, triggered even more
concern and fear among Muslims, including those in Diyarbekir. Right after the signing of the
London Treaty, Diyarbekir’s governor sent a report to the government that talk of a reform
plan was causing turmoil and social unrest among Diyarbekir’s ethnic groups. According to
the governor, rumors of reform were “causing much excitement and alarm among the Islamic
population”. Speculative reports in newspapers about the alleged endorsement and possible
implementation of a reform plan were “offending the sentiments and minds of Muslims and
were lately giving rise to tumult.” The governor argued that the Muslim middle class in
Diyarbekir had faith in the government, but could not remain “indifferent to such a question
affecting the life and and future of our homeland (istikbâl-ı memleketimiz)”. The Muslims, he
concluded his report, would reject such a reform plan and he “began expressing the possibility
that terrible consequences (fena neticeler) could emerge from it in the future”.19

The final reform plan envisaged the formation of two provinces from six vilayets
(Erzurum, Van, Bitlis, Diyarbekir, Mamuret-ul Aziz, and Sivas), and assigned two European
inspectors to oversee Armenian affairs. The reform package was signed into law in February
1914. In the spring of 1914, the backlash by Muslims eventuated as expected by the governor.
In another report, he mentioned clashes and riots between Muslims and Christians in the
bazaar and inner city of Diyarbekir. The Muslims expressed their hatred of Armenians by
painting anti-Christian graffiti on walls and insulting Christian symbols such as crucifixes
with “repulsive profanity”. The governor concluded that the situation in Diyarbekir was
firmly “unfavorable for Christians”, and that Christian communities were “in complete
despair.”20 The ones responsible for the organization of a climate of anti-Armenian hatred
were local CUP powerholders. In the summer of 1914, as the European crisis was deepening,
the Ottoman civil inspector Mihran Boyadjian was travelling to Diyarbekir and encountered
the Young Turk political hardliner Pirinççizâde Aziz Feyzi on the way. Aziz Feyzi quite
openly threatened the Armenians in a bitter condemnation:

On the road, we often spoke about politics in the car. Feyzi Bey did not fail to slip
in, in his conversations, several threats against my coreligionists. “The
Armenians,” he repeated, with bitterness, “have misbehaved towards us in our
days of distress during the Balkan Wars. Patriarch Zaven, the Catholicos of

19 Bağbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (henceforth BOA), DH.KMS 2-2/5-7, document 7, Diyarbekir governor to Interior Ministry,
26 March 1913.
20 BOA, DH.SYS 23/4, document 2, Diyarbekir governor to Interior Ministry, May 1914.
Etchmiadzin and Nubar have sought to appeal to foreign intervention; that will cost you dearly my friend, your future is in danger.”

Finally Aziz Feyzi warned: “You will see now, what it means to demand reforms.” The radicalization of political elites heralded a general deep crisis of interethnic relations in Diyarbekir, which had now reached the threshold between hatred and violence. That threshold was crossed when in August 1914, the grain market of Diyarbekir became the scene of mass plunder as many Muslim merchants joined in seizing the opportunity to loot the stores of Christians and set fire to their shops. Soon it became known that the Young Turk loyalist police chief, Memduh Bey, had “allowed Kurds and Muslims to pillage Armenian stores”. According to Mihran Boyadjian, Memduh Bey had started the fire himself to create opportunities for pillage. Not only was the involvement widespread, but the inaction by local authorities implied tacit approval of the pogrom.

The war and ensuing violence in the Balkans triggered a severe radicalization in Young Turk thinking and politics. Their perception that the catastrophe of the Balkans should never be allowed to happen to the remaining territories of the Ottoman Empire, especially the eastern provinces, would give birth to unprecedented forms of population politics. One major outcome of these processes was a deep fear, or perhaps a complex, of loss. The fear of losing territory was a persistent phobia of both late Ottoman and Turkish political culture. Some Ottomans foresaw the looming cataclysm. In his 1913 book on the Balkan wars, Aram Andonian wrote with considerable concern that “the principle of nationality” had spelled disaster in the Balkans and was utterly untenable in the eastern provinces, where most Armenians lived. Andonian had planned to write a second volume to his book. He was never able to do so.

Discussion: local elites and genocide

Scholars of genocide have argued that local dynamics can influence the course and intensity of genocidal processes. Local political or social elites can expedite and intensify, or delay and resist genocidal destruction steered from above. Political elites can recruit local

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22 Ibid., p.480.
23 BOA, DH,ŞFR 44/234, Emniyet-i Umûmiye Müdiriyyeti (Ali Mûnil) to Diyarbekir, 13 September 1914.
24 Yeghiayan (ed.), British Foreign Office Dossiers, p.480.
26 Examples of local studies of genocide are: Tomislav Dulč, Utopias of Nation: Local Mass Killing in Bosnia and Hercegovina, 1941-42 (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2005); Lee Ann Fujii, Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); Dieter Pohl, Nationalsozialistische Judentodverfolgung in Ostgalizien 1941-
powerholders for their ends, and conversely local powerholders can manipulate political elites to further their own interests. The potential of powerful local families to mobilize dozens or in some cases hundreds of potential killers can contribute to them being favored by the center. Mass murder can develop from this mutual dependence and tacit pact: local elites depend on the center to secure a power base, and the center depends on local elites to carry out genocide. This dynamic can give rise to a mobilization process in which men participate in mass killing in exchange for economic and political benefits granted by the regime. Thus, ethnic hatred may significantly contribute but not necessarily satisfactorily explain the mobilization of perpetrators. Rather, maintaining and increasing power for local actors can shape patterns of recruitment for and participation in genocide.

The Ottoman province Diyarbekir served as a platform for exemplifying how local dynamics shaped the Armenian genocide at the provincial level as a product of competition between families. The competition between urban elites was a major factor that contributed to the intensity of the violence in Diyarbekir. Before the war, the main families in the city were engaged in a fierce struggle for political and economic power. Such a structural factor could easily be manipulated by the CUP dictatorship for its own ends as collaboration would be rewarded. The war put even more pressure on this field of competition as resources became scarcer and passivity posed a threat to one’s livelihood. A leading family such as the Pirinççizâde emerged victorious from this competition by volunteering in the Special Organization militias, by being more ruthless in their competitive efforts, and by actively collaborating with the campaign the CUP regime deemed most salient: the murder of their Armenian neighbors. The genocide then emerged as an opportunity for perpetrators to solidify kin ties. When, during the genocide, a man like Aziz Feyzi proved to be a most ruthless tormentor of Armenians, it is likely that in his eyes he was only pursuing the interests of his family amidst the difficult conditions of war. From this subjective perspective, the genocide evolved not as a clear evil but rather as the shadow of virtue. After all, family matters.