DIYARBEKIR AND THE ARMENIAN CRISIS OF 1895

Jelle Verheij

INTRODUCTION

The city of Diyarbekir was a truly cosmopolitan Middle Eastern city prior to the First World War. It had an official newspaper that appeared in three languages, Ottoman Turkish, Armenian and Syriac—we may safely assume that many residents were multi-lingual—and housed followers of all three major Middle Eastern religions, Islam, Christianity and Judaism. The Muslims and Christians were themselves composed of various groupings, divided by ethnicity/language and sect, with the Christians particularly mixed. Along with the Gregorian Armenians, the largest group, there were Catholic Armenians, Orthodox and Catholic Syrians or Syriacs (Sur yani), Greeks (Rum), again both Orthodox and Catholic, the Nestorians and Catholic Nestorians, Protestants (both Armenian and Syriac), and a handful of European residents. Nearly all of these Christian religious groups had been officially recognized by the Ottoman Government by the end of the nineteenth century, had their own places of worship and sometimes schools, and were represented to the authorities through their own community heads. Because Diyarbekir was an important regional centre, several bishops resided in the city. The Muslim population was less heterogeneous than the Christian, but still used at least three languages: Turkish, Kurdish (both Kurmanci and Zazaki) and Arabic. Notably, most Muslim city dwellers at the time in question would have defined their

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2 The Catholic communities had developed through the work of the Capuchin Order, established in Diyarbekir since the 17th century, and Protestant communities through the American missionaries of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) frequenting the city.

3 Whether Zaza ought to be considered a form of Kurdish is a moot point, with linguist scholarship supporting the view that it is not. An interesting indication that Zaza-speaking citizens were seen as a distinct population group at this time is found in an official Ottoman document on the 1895 crisis which makes explicit reference to the death ‘of one Zaza’ (BOA A.MKT.MHM 637–3).
identity simply as ‘Muslim’ or ‘Ottoman’ regardless of the language(s) they spoke. From a contemporary perspective, ‘Kurds’ were the tribesmen from the countryside.

Diyarbekir was a city that often struck visitors with the seemingly peaceful coexistence of its numerous religious and ethnic groups⁴—but in 1895, it experienced a sudden eruption of unprecedented ethnic violence. On November 1, Muslims attacked the Armenians and other Christians. After three days of clashes, between 300 and 1,200 Armenians and other Christians and between 70 and 200 Muslims had lost their lives.⁵ Other towns in the province of Diyarbekir, particularly Siverek and Palu, saw similar carnage. For weeks, the countryside, even parts of the vilâyet where almost no Armenians lived, became a stage for continuing violence, leaving many villages pillaged, burned or even completely destroyed.

Diyarbekir was by no means the only province in the Ottoman Empire to witness such events in the autumn of 1895. In the capital, Istanbul, and all over the Asiatic provinces of the Empire, clashes between Armenians and Muslims erupted. Because Muslims were generally the aggressors and a much larger number of Armenians perished, this has become aptly designated the ‘(Armenian) massacres’. The conflict in Diyarbekir was particularly violent and enormous damage to property was inflicted. The year 1895 was probably the most catastrophic during the 19th-century history of the city, and, in a way, it never really recovered. In the months and years following the crisis, many Armenians who had the means fled to Istanbul or overseas to the United States. Thus, when the Ittihadist (CUP) Government decided to deport the Armenians two decades later, Diyarbekir’s Armenian community had already lost most of its former strength.

Essentially, this article is a micro-level attempt to unearth facts regarding events that are often mentioned but still largely shrouded in mystery when it comes to causes and details. Naturally, the situation in Diyarbekir cannot be isolated from the general development of the Armenian Question in the 19th century or the events occurring elsewhere in the region and beyond in 1895. With this in mind, therefore, I will first set out the main lines of the Armenian Question during the rule of Sultan Abdülhamid II, particularly in the years immediately preceding 1895, before returning to the situation in Diyarbekir. Obviously, an extensive treatment of the

⁴ For fragments on Diyarbekir from various travel reports, translated into Turkish, see Korkusuz, M. Şefik. Seyahatnamelerde Diyarbakır (Istanbul: Kent Yayınları, 2003).
⁵ To get an idea of the relative scale of this death toll in the city, these figures would have to be multiplied tenfold today.