

Genocide and Humanitarian Resistance in Ottoman Syria, 1915-1916*

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A royal treasury is needed
to alleviate these pains.¹

Catholicos Sahag II Khabayan
on the plight of Armenian deportees

Armenian survivors arrived in Ottoman Syria within a month of the beginning of the arrests, deportations, and massacres in April 1915. According to a document in the Aleppo Armenian Prelacy archives,² 322 deportees from Zeytun³ arrived in Bab, north of the city, as early as 18 May.⁴ In less than a year, the number of deportees in the area was in the hundreds of thousands. The humanitarian resistance Armenians waged in this region during World War I provides insight into key aspects of the Armenian Genocide. I define humanitarian resistance here as actions carried out illegally, or against the will of the authorities, to save Armenian deportees from annihilation. I examine the policies of the local, regional, and central authorities on the one hand, and the self-help efforts

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1. From the Catholicos's report on his meetings with Cemal Pasha in June 1915, as cited in P. Yeghiayan, 1975, p. 51.

2. For an overview of the minutes and reports in these archives, see V. Shemmassian, 2013.

3. For a detailed examination of the chain of events that culminated in the deportation of the Armenians of Zeytun, see A. Arkun, 2011.

4. Armenian National Council, List of Armenians around Aleppo, Folder 41, p. 14-15. All dates are according to the Gregorian calendar.

5. Historian Raymond Kévorkian has referred to the destruction of the Armenians in Syria and Mesopotamia from fall 1915 to summer 1916 as "the second phase" in his publications since the late 1990s. See R. Kévorkian, 1998. I too employ this designation, yet my analytical aperture covers the period from May to August 1915. As we shall see, developments in spring and summer 1915 are crucial for this reassessment.

6. As we shall see, Armenian relief groups operated with the tacit blessing of the local authorities, until a concerted government crackdown in the fall of 1915 forced them to go underground. Humanitarian resistance is the description

of Armenians aided by western missionaries on the other, offering a fresh perspective on Armenian self-help during the genocide.⁵ I outline how a series of decisions rolled out in 1915-1916 culminated in massacres in the Syrian desert, and how thousands of Armenians survived the carnage through the efforts of a humanitarian network.⁶ I argue that despite the violent mechanisms of control and destruction, the genocide of the Armenians in the triangle formed by Aleppo, Ras ul-Ain, and Der Zor did not progress unhindered. Deportee agency proved an important factor. This reassessment relies on previously untapped primary sources – particularly the minutes, ledgers, and reports of the Council for Refugees⁷ – as well as fresh insights from others – including Ottoman documents, western diplomatic and missionary records, accounts compiled by Aram Andonian in the immediate aftermath of the war, and survivor memoirs.

THE "SECOND PHASE": AN OVERVIEW

When Armenians surviving the deportations and massacres began trickling into Ottoman Syria, another wave of mass murder was far from being a forgone conclusion. The scramble for patched-up solutions by the local authorities in Aleppo and Der Zor in this period, and the non-committal, vague response to their appeals for guidance and assistance received from the Interior Ministry indicate the absence of a detailed blueprint on how to deal with deportees managing to arrive in Syria. Once the eastern and central provinces were emptied of Armenians however, Talat turned his attention to Ottoman Syria. Until then, Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) leaders orchestrating the empire-wide deportations and massacres had not paid much attention to the

deportees who managed to arrive in “the regions of southeastern Aleppo, Der Zor, and Urfa.”⁸ Talat knew full well that sending deportees to Der Zor was tantamount to a death sentence.⁹ Further action would probably be unnecessary. Yet Armenian self-help was overlooked. As we shall see, a humanitarian resistance network comprised of church committees, influential Armenian dignitaries,¹⁰ doctors,¹¹ and nurses,¹² as well as missionaries¹³ and local Muslims¹⁴ and Christians¹⁵ helped anchor and support thousands in Aleppo in 1915-1916, and saved the lives of thousands of others elsewhere in Syria. And while it is true that most deportees were languishing in concentration camps, with hundreds dying every day of disease and deprivation, the Armenians were not written off. They had begun to eke out subsistence in several towns. Officials complained to Constantinople that Armenian life reconstituted in the towns of Rakka¹⁶ and Der Zor¹⁷ in spring 1916, for example.

For the authorities, the large number of surviving Armenian deportees in Ottoman Syria posed serious demographic and health security problems. In sparsely populated areas, it proved impossible to maintain the 10 percent threshold the central authorities had set for deportee presence.¹⁸ In cities and villages, epidemics carried by hapless deportees spread like wildfire among the general population. In camps along the Euphrates, sandwiched between important military supply lines on the coast and in Mesopotamia, the Armenian “surplus population” had nowhere to go and was perceived as a threat. This prompted the central authorities to initiate a second wave of persecution, decapitating the Aleppo Armenian community of its religious and intellectual leadership (in a fashion reminiscent of the arrests in Constantinople on 24 April 1915 and the weeks that followed), banning much-needed humanitarian assistance without which

I employ for the efforts of this underground network, because it was operating, by and large, *against* the will of the authorities.

7. These documents from the Aleppo Armenian Prelacy Archives include the minutes of the meetings of the Council for Refugees, established by the Armenian Apostolic Church of Aleppo in May 1915; lists of deportees compiled by this committee; and ledgers and receipts that provide a detailed accounting of donations collected to assist the arriving deportees and expenses made to provide them with food, shelter, medical care, and safety.

8. Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (Ottoman Prime Ministry Archives), Dahiliye Nezareti Şifre Kalemi [abbreviated BOA/DH.ŞFR] 52/188, coded telegram from Talat to provinces on 2 May 1915.

9. F. Dündar, 2010, p. 78-79.

10. These include, for example, brothers Onnig and Armenak Mazloumian, known as “the barons” for the well-known hotel of the same name they owned in Aleppo. Cemal Pasha “loved and protected both of them,” wrote Andonian. And for good reason. The entire officer corps of the fourth army and Ottoman

civilian officialdom benefited from the full spectrum of the services offered by Hotel Baron, holding meetings, dinners and parties at the hotel, and staying there for the duration of their visit to Aleppo. A. Andonian, 1921, p. 27-30.

11. For example Doctor Aram Assadour Altounyan, the founder and head physician of the Altounyan Hospital in Aleppo. For more on Dr. Altounian, see T. Altounyan, 1990.

12. Elmasd Santoorian is a prominent example. An Armenian nurse who survived typhus in Aleppo and went on to become the head nurse of a military hospital in the Azizieh quarter of the city, Santoorian helped anchor dozens of Armenian women in Aleppo, securing jobs for them at the hospital. E. Santoorian, 1989.

13. For example Swiss missionary Beatrice Rohner alone established two orphanages and took in more than 1,000 children, with the financial support of the U.S. embassy in Constantinople and other donors. NA/RG59/867.4016/373 Detailed report on "Armenian Atrocities" by Consul Jackson sent to the Secretary of State on 4 March 1918, in A. Sarafian, 2004, p. 594.

most would die of hunger in camps, encouraging islamization, and forcing assimilation by scattering Armenians in Muslim villages and prohibiting Armenian schools and education. Still, this proved insufficient. The Ottoman authorities liquidated the camps in Ras ul-Ain in March 1916 and those along the Euphrates in spring and early summer 1916 and marched the deportees in the direction of Der Zor.¹⁹ Concomitantly, the Interior Ministry sent a telegram to provinces and provincial districts in the region prohibiting the entry of foreign nationals or non-Muslim merchants into areas of deportation and settlement of Armenians.²⁰ The Armenians could now be killed out of sight. A reinforced gendarmerie, alongside Circassian bands from the district, proceeded to massacre tens of thousands around Ras ul-Ain and Der Zor, as we shall see.

But not all deportees caught in the triangle between Aleppo, Ras ul-Ain, and Der Zor in 1915-1916 were annihilated. Aleppo's Armenian community by and large remained in place, although the deportation threat hung over their heads throughout the war. Thousands of deportees also managed to stay in Aleppo city through the efforts of the humanitarian resistance network. Moreover, a partial policy of settlement existed in the triangle under study until spring 1916. Even when this policy was abandoned, and the deportees were sent to the abattoirs of Der Zor, several thousand Armenians in certain towns and villages, particularly in Rakka, escaped re-deportation and survived the war.²¹ Their experience is testament to the complexities of genocide that escape stringent models of interpretation, yet can indeed be understood within the broader context of local dynamics, wartime contingencies, economics and labor, and individual agency.

ARMENIAN AGENCY: FROM RELIEF EFFORTS
TO HUMANITARIAN RESISTANCE

As deportees began arriving in Ottoman Syria in May 1915, the ten-thousand-strong Armenian community in Aleppo mobilized to assist them. The Prelacy of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Aleppo initially took *ad hoc* measures to support the new arrivals for a few days. The church ledgers indicate that between 19 and 24 May, nearly 400 deportees had already received funds, food (bread, cheese, eggs, bulgur, yogurt, onions, and oil), and fuelwood.²² On 24 May, the church launched a much more coordinated effort, inviting a group of community leaders to form the Council for Refugees (*Kaghtaganats zhoghov* in Armenian, henceforth, the council), tasked with “caring for the immediate financial, moral, and health needs” of the arriving Armenians.²³ The city’s Armenian Evangelical and Catholic churches launched their own humanitarian initiatives²⁴ and coordinated efforts as needed.²⁵ U.S. Consul Jesse B. Jackson noticed this groundswell of support from the community early on, reporting to his superiors on 5 June that the deportees are being “taken care of locally by the sympathizing Armenian population of this city.”²⁶ In another report, he noted, “Each religious community has a relief committee to care for its own.”²⁷

The council exercised caution as it launched its humanitarian effort in an extremely tense environment. “Taking into account the current sensitive political situation,” the council’s first order of business was to secure approval for its relief work from the governor of Aleppo Province Mehmet Celal Bey, a friend of the Armenians who would be removed from his position in June 1915.²⁸ Thus the group resolved “to inform [the governor] of the formation

14. Some Ottoman officials and other locals, including several individuals mentioned in this article, provided support and assistance to the humanitarian efforts in the region.

15. One such example is George Soukkar, an Assyrian, who worked hard to secure the settlement of deportees in the city of Der Zor. “He spent so much time with the deportees that he too eventually contracted typhus and died [in early 1916],” Andonian wrote. See AGBU Nubar Library [abbreviated BNu], Andonian, Folder 52: The massacres of Der Zor, “Der Zor,” p. 39. See also, R. Kévorkian, 1998, p. 174.

16. Garabed Kapigian recounts seeing 4-5 Turks “in hunting apparel” in spring 1916 who walked up and down Rakka’s streets observing everything closely. “A week later they disappeared; perhaps they went to Der Zor.” G. Kapigian, 1924, p. 460-461. Kapigian was an Armenian intellectual from Sepasdia/Sivas who spent two years in Rakka and its environs, and witnessed the developments along the Euphrates line first-hand.

17. M. Aghazarian, 1919, p. 22-23.

18. Yet beginning in summer 1915, the increasing number of deportees arriving in the region, and the central

authorities' insistence on keeping the percentage of Armenians in the designated settlement areas below ten percent of the entire population created a conundrum with which central, regional, and local authorities grappled, and from which deportees suffered severely, being re-deported again and again from one region to another because their presence exceeded the threshold. For a detailed treatment of the statistical dimension, see F. DüNDAR, 2010 (p. 113-119 deal with the settlement areas in Syria); and T. AKÇAM, 2012, p. 227-285.

19. In March 1916, authorities accelerated re-deportation from the Ras ul-Ain camp. Convoys were marched in two directions: Der Zor and Mosul. Orders from the center stipulated that re-deportation to Mosul avoid the main road, under the pretext that this "most important" military supply line need to remain free from Typhus and other epidemics. BOA/DH.ŞFR 60/199, telegram from Talat to Zor district on 16 February 1915.

20. BOA/DH.ŞFR 61/32, telegram from the Interior Ministry's General Security Directorate to several provinces and provincial districts on 13 February 1916.

of the council, provide a list of members, and to start work only with the permission of the governorate."²⁹ On 10 June, more than two weeks after it had begun its activities, the council received local government authorization.³⁰ For as long as it proved possible, the council coordinated its efforts with the authorities and appealed to them for help. Indeed, as the minutes show, the community's leadership proceeded with the utmost sensitivity in its requests to local, regional, and central authorities to ameliorate the condition of the deportees.

The council set to work to prepare lists of deportees in the city and neighboring towns and villages, and thus ascertain housing, food, and medical needs. It hired a full-time employee to assist in the day-to-day work.³¹ Within a day, a list was compiled: in total, 781 people from four towns and villages had arrived in Aleppo by that point.³² The council provided them with bread and four *metaliks* per person per day.³³ Some 82 deportees had already received a total of 1,927 *kuruş*, their share for 15 days.³⁴ In subsequent days, hundreds of others received the same sum.³⁵ The council noted that several dozen families were well off in their home towns, but had left with very little, so it resolved to loan them one *mecidiye* per person. The financial situation of deportees back home factored into the decision to provide loans because, at this early stage, the community leaders in Aleppo were operating on the assumption that the deportees would soon have access to the assets they had left behind. That was not to happen. Moreover, the council did not suspect that within weeks thousands upon thousands of deportees would flood the area, exerting such a strain on the community's resources that even providing basic relief for their survival would constitute a major challenge, rendering practices like loaning money a near impossibility. By 31 May, however, the council

had come to the realization that it could not handle the problems alone. It appealed to the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople – the other major hub of relief efforts³⁶ – asking for 500 Ottoman liras, in view of the large influx of deportees and the “insufficient means” at the council’s disposal.³⁷

Large sums of money transferred from the bank account of the Apostolic Church of Aleppo to the council helped meet deportee needs. On 23 May, the council withdrew 100 Ottoman liras (12,700 *kurus*) from the bank. Two days later, a significant sum (300 Ottoman liras) from the Catholicosate of Cilicia was placed at the council’s disposal. Donations from the local Armenian community and some non-Armenians constituted another source of income.³⁸ The council regulated the process of collection as much as possible: “Taking into account the fact that many individuals are handing their donations to this or that [random] person, it was decided to make announcements in church that donations be given only to the council’s treasurer, Sarkis Djierdjian.”³⁹

From the beginning, the council did not confine its efforts to the city or even the province of Aleppo, sending aid and dispatching missions all the way to Der Zor. As the Armenian Apostolic Church did not have a presence there, Der Zor’s Armenian Catholic Prelacy served as a local partner, and communication between the two was achieved via telegrams sent from the Armenian Catholic Prelacy in Aleppo to its counterpart in Zor. This triangle of coordination would prove useful for aid efforts in Zor during these early months. Already in its meeting on 27 May, the council resolved to send 40 Ottoman liras through the Catholic Prelacy in Aleppo to Zor, earmarked for deportees from Zeytun.⁴⁰

The situation changed drastically in the fall of 1915. Having deported most of the empire’s Armenian

21. According to a survey conducted by local authorities, there were 8,000 Armenians in Raqqa in 1916: G. Kapigian, 1924, p. 471-472. Auguste Bernau, a German eyewitness who passes through the city in early September 1916, estimated “5 to 6,000 Armenians, especially women and children [...] dispersed in the various districts in the city, and living in groups of 50-60 in the houses which the leniency of the governor procured for the poorest.” See DE/PA-AA; R14094; A 28162; Report from Rossler to Hollweg on 27 September 1916, in W. Gust, 2014, p. 654.

22. Beginning in May 1915, and for the duration of World War I, the Prelacy of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Aleppo maintained records of its income and expenses, which stand testament to its tremendous humanitarian relief effort. See Armenian National Council, Records of Council for Refugees, Folder 22, 3.

23. Council Records, Folder 38, minutes of Session 1.

24. The efforts of Reverend Hovhannes Eskijian, pastor of the Emmanuel Evangelical Church in the city, are the focus of H. Kaiser, 2002. For its part, the Armenian Catholic Church of Aleppo

cared for 3,000 deportees, “who are lodged in different localities and fed by the local church community,” according to Jackson. See NA/RG59/867.4016/219, Enclosure no. 4 with dispatch no. 382 to Embassy, Constantinople; report by Consul Jackson sent to Ambassador Morgenthau on 29 September 1918, quoted in A. Sarafian, 2004, p. 314.

25. The Armenian Protestant Church also provided financial support to the council. On 24 June, for example, the council received a donation of 80 liras from the Protestant community in the city; see Council Records, Folder 38, minutes of Session 22. This coordination between various groups and actors continued when the humanitarian relief efforts went underground.

26. NA/RG59/867.4016/77 Report by Consul Jackson sent to Ambassador Morgenthau on 5 June 1915, in A. Sarafian, 2004, p. 57.

27. NA/RG59/867.4016/219 Consul Jackson to Ambassador Morgenthau on 29 September 1918, in A. Sarafian, 2004, p. 308.

28. Governor Celal Bey provided direct and indirect assistance to the Aleppo Armenians’ relief effort. He advocated for the deportees

population, the central authorities now focused their attention on the survivors who had managed to reach Syria, enacting a series of swift actions, the focal point of which was Aleppo province. A number of high level meetings and consultations in the region, the formation of the Sub-Directorate for Deportees in Aleppo, the dispatch of officials to the city to oversee the re-deportation process, the replacement of the governor twice (and finally with an Armenophobe),⁴¹ the crackdown on the leadership of the community (particularly the banishment of the Catholicos to Jerusalem and the arrest of community leaders in Aleppo), the decisions to remove all Armenian deportees from the city and to ban the entry of newly-arriving convoys, were far from disparate, unrelated actions crammed into a few weeks. They point to a sustained effort by the central authorities to neutralize organized Armenian response to their policies and deal with what they perceived to be a demographic problem created by the arrival of tens of thousands of survivors.⁴² However, it was circumstances on the ground – particularly the spread of typhus – that prompted military and civilian authorities to accelerate the re-deportation process, as ridding the province of diseased deportees was considered a military necessity. For the authorities, the deportees had become a serious health hazard both for the population of Aleppo and the military supply lines in the area. They had to be removed quickly. The argument of military necessity was now used once again to deport Armenians – who wouldn’t have been in such condition had they not been forcibly removed from their homes and sent on death marches in the first place, also under the pretext of “military necessity.” Thus, the re-deportation of Armenians from Aleppo city picked up pace in fall 1915 due to a confluence of a number of factors.

Initially, the efforts of a relief network stretching from Aleppo all the way to the camps in Ras ul-Ain and Der Zor had – in general – received the blessing or the tacit approval of the local and regional authorities. Yet the crackdown on humanitarian relief efforts in the fall of 1915 gradually forced these efforts to go underground. Thus, I make a clear distinction in my work between efforts in the region up until the crackdown, referring to it as humanitarian relief, and the activities of the underground network (comprised primarily of the same actors), referring to it as humanitarian resistance. It is important to make this distinction since, beginning in the fall of 1915, efforts to help the Armenian deportees were by and large being conducted *against* the will of the authorities, and hence they should be properly designated as resistance. This struggle saved the lives of thousands and tried to keep deportee morale high by distributing food and medication clandestinely, caring for orphans, hiding deportees in homes, establishing a secret communication network across camps, circulating handwritten newspapers, among other efforts.⁴³

It is crucial to underscore Armenian agency here. The scholarship (*and* the popular discourse) on humanitarian efforts during the Genocide focuses on the role of western missionaries and consuls, who emerge as selfless heroes protecting and saving hundreds of thousands of helpless Armenians.⁴⁴ “That the missionaries helped between 1 and 2 million Armenians testified to their commitment and ability to deliver a stricken people from deprivation and death,” wrote Suzanne Moranian.⁴⁵ The genocide “spawned extraordinary heroism on the part of American foreign service officers – from consuls posted to remote areas to the U.S. ambassador in Constantinople,” asserted Peter Balakian.⁴⁶ Hans-

in his communication with the central authorities as well. As caravans of deportees arrived in the province, he continuously pressed the Ministry of the Interior, asking for a concrete plan to ensure the dignified treatment of the deportees, beyond general and vague orders. He lectured the central authorities that it was unbecoming for a state to leave the deportees hungry and without shelter. BOA/DH.ŞFR 471/112 Telegram from Celal Bey to the Ministry of the Interior dated 6 May 1915.

29. Council Records, Folder 38, Minutes of Session 2.

30. *Ibid.*, Session 12.

31. *Ibid.*, Session 2. Later, more employees would be hired. On June 20, for example, the council hired an Armenian from Van, Nazaret Aghapegian, for 10 *mecidiye* a month, to run errands and facilitate relief work around the city. See Council Records, Folder 38, Session 21. On July 2, the council decided to pay a teacher from Zeytun, a certain Mr. Mahdesian, 5 *mecidiye* per month upon receiving a request from the latter to be compensated for the work he had been doing. Earlier, Mr. Mahdesian had been compiling lists of deportees and doing other

clerical work without pay; see Council Records, Folder 38, Session 24.

32. *Ibid.*, Session 3.

33. *Ibid.* At its fifth session, the council decided to only distribute bread allocated by the municipality, but reconfirmed the four *metaliks* per person allocation.

34. Council Records, Folder 22, Session 4.

35. *Ibid.*

36. The Patriarchate in Constantinople, under the leadership of Patriarch Zaven Der Yeghiayan, was involved in extensive relief efforts. In his memoirs, Der Yeghiayan details the humanitarian resistance and relief efforts mounted by the Patriarchate: Z. Der Yeghiayan, 2002, p. 109-124.

37. Council Records, Folder 38, Session 6. It is unclear whether the money was ever sent.

38. While most contributions were one lira or less, a few sizeable gifts were also made. Between May 18 and 20, nearly 10 donations were made, only one of which was significantly large (1,000 *kuruş*). Council Records, Folder 22, Session 4.

39. Council Records, Folder 38, Session 8.

40. *Ibid.*, Session 4.

41. Talat's brother-in-law and governor of Bitlis, Mustafa Abdülhalik became Aleppo

Lukas Kieser noted how the Ottoman authorities “could not destroy this international humanitarian resistance that was, interestingly enough, also supported by German diplomats on the ground, even after the United States entered the war.”⁴⁷ What remains neglected in scholarly inquiry is Armenian agency. I argue that it was the Ottoman Armenians who *drove* this humanitarian resistance waged in the Ottoman Empire. Western humanitarianism provided tremendous material and moral support, yet, as this article demonstrates, it was the Armenians themselves who led the resistance effort and shouldered the larger share of the burden, distributing humanitarian aid and funds to deportees huddled in church and school courtyards and, ultimately, in concentration camps – despite the dangers involved.

CONCENTRATION CAMPS⁴⁸

For almost a full year, from spring 1915 to spring 1916, the majority of the deportees arriving in Ottoman Syria found a respite from massacres, only to fight starvation and disease in concentration camps. There, inmates caught between the threat of re-deportation and burial ditches sought a way out by collaborating with, appeasing, manipulating, or resisting the system. Even those considered the weakest and needing protection most, the children, exercised agency: they begged, rummaged for food, and relayed messages to other camps clandestinely.

Raymond Kévorkian identified clusters of concentration and transit camps in Ottoman Syria: a network of camps north of Aleppo (chief among them Islahiye, Rajo, Katma, Azaz, Bab and Mumbuj), several camps along the Berlin-Baghdad railroad (Suruc, Arabpunar, and Ras ul-Ain), and concentration camps along the Euphrates River

(Meskene, Dipsi, Abuharar, Hamam, Rakka, Sebka, and Der Zor, among others).⁴⁹ Head of the Directorate for the Settlement of Tribes and Emigrants (İskân-ı Aşâyirîn ve Muhâcirîn Müdüriyeti or IAMM) Muftizâde Şükrü Kaya Bey's meticulous guideline outlining the deportation and settlement process of Armenian deportees is a key document to understand the administrative structure of these camps, yet it also highlights the challenges of reconciling the official paper trail with conditions on the ground.⁵⁰ The guideline (*talimatname*) laid out the administrative framework in areas designated for the settlement of Armenians in Urfa, Zor, and Aleppo, providing for rest, transit, and settlement sites each with sufficient deportation, nutrition, and storage officers; necessary food, means of transport, comfort, and security provisions for convoys with particular attention to women, children, and the sick; and temporary shelter (tents), housing, cultivable land, livestock, assistance for the poor. To say that this utopic ordinance stood in stark contrast to the situation on the ground is an understatement.⁵¹ Deprivation, exposure, abuse, and danger were staples of the deportation and settlement process – the latter mostly a euphemism for leaving hundreds of thousands to their own devices in heavily guarded concentration camps in the desert. Even the initial, albeit limited, settlement of some deportees in towns and villages in Ottoman Syria would be reversed in spring 1916 with some exceptions.

Eyewitnesses, on the other hand, provide an intimate, detailed picture of the conditions in the camps and describe how the deportees bore the brunt of policies enacted by authorities, without being privy to the dynamics among the central, regional, and local authorities. Dumped into these camps, deportees took their fate into their own hands. They huddled in tents sewn of rags and bits of cloth.⁵² Families

governor on 4 October 1915. Abdülhalik's appointment constitutes an important tactical move in what Armenian Genocide scholars refer to as the "dual-track" mechanism: an official track employed government communication to convey (re-)deportation orders, resettlement, and the liquidation of Armenian property, while an unofficial track ordered "extralegal acts of violence, such as forced evacuations, killings, and massacres" privately, through trusted party functionaries. For a brief discussion on this mechanism, see T. Akçam, 2012, p. xxiv-xxv.

42. A telegram issued by the ministry of the interior on 18 October 1915 indicated that there were 30,000 deportees in Aleppo city alone awaiting re-deportation. See Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, Dahiliye Nezareti Emniyet-i Umumiye Müdürlüğü [abbreviated BOA/DH.EUM], 2 Şb. 68/80. Tens of thousands had already been deported to Bab, Mumbuj, and Maarra, or farther to Urfa, Zor, and Mosul. BOA/DH.EUM, 2 Şb. 68/76 Telegram from Governor Bekir Sami to Interior Ministry on 5 September 1915.

43. See K. Mouradian, 2015.

44. Armenian agency has received little scholarly

attention. Research on Armenian resistance is scarce and focuses on armed resistance during the genocide. Yet the scholarship on other cases of genocide, particularly the Holocaust, examines a broad spectrum of actions under the concept of resistance. See, for example, Y. Mais, B. Gurewitsch, and B. Lovenheim, 2007; D. Dwork and R. Jan van Pelt, 2009; N. Tec, 2013; P. Henry, 2014; and M.A. Grodin, 2014.

45. S. Moranian, 2003, p. 213.

46. P. Balakian, 2003, p. xvi.

47. H.L. Kieser, 2007, p. 48.

48. For an examination of concentration camps during the Armenian Genocide, see K. Mouradian, 2015.

49. R. Kévorkian, 2011, p. 625-672.

50. BOA/DHEUM. 2. ŞB, 68/88, copy of 56-article guideline sent by IAMM director Şükrü Kaya to Talat on 8 October 1915.

51. Historian Hilmar Kaiser argued, “The deportations created a huge ‘surplus population’ without land and income that the authorities had to deal with. The Ottoman government was practically bankrupt and needed Armenian assets to finance the war effort. It was not realistic to provide for hundreds of

and individuals were often taken in by compatriots, relatives, and acquaintances.⁵³ Others sought shelter in tents vacated by the death of fellow deportees. Familial ties constituted the innermost circle of social support.⁵⁴ Family members tried to perform their traditional functions as much as possible, attempting to create a sense of normality in the camps. A broader yet crucial circle of support was that of families from the same village or neighborhood. The *Zeituntsis* stood up for their fellow townspeople, the *Marashtsis* supported theirs. On issues of common concern, like safety, orphan care, health care, and hygiene, inmates worked together.

The camps were semi-porous, with locals generally allowed to enter to sell products, purchase – or simply snatch – women and children, or steal and abduct during night raids, with gendarmes often passively observing or, worse, aiding and abetting the victimizers for a share of the booty. The humanitarian resistance network also benefitted from this porosity: Armenians disguised as local merchants risked their lives smuggling food and medicine into these camps.

Authorities controlled the large deportee populations by creating hierarchies and delegating certain responsibilities to a select group of inmates. These tasks included maintaining order and gathering intelligence inside the camp, controlling epidemics, burying corpses, and transporting people from one camp to the other. The advantages of holding a position at camps were numerous, and the temptation to hold on to the little authority these Armenians wielded over fellow deportees was difficult to resist. Thus, when these Armenian camp officials were re-deported, they wanted to have a similar position in their next camp as well. A power struggle ensued between competing interests. But a new camp was a different environment with its own dynamics, and

only few succeeded in carrying their responsibilities over to the next camp. Deportees tried either to join this fleeting elite or to influence it through connections and bribes.⁵⁵ Much of camp life, from the selection of the spot where a newly-arriving deportee's tent was set up to the time and mode of that person's re-deportation, was determined by this elaborate network of connections, and the person's ability to furnish what survivor Grigoris Balakian refers to as the "customary bribe."⁵⁶

Deportees realized that sharing information was key to survival. Some prepared handwritten flyers reporting developments and rumors and passed them on in camps. When a new convoy arrived, these "reporters" would approach the new arrivals and ask them for information about conditions in the towns and camps whence they were deported. Flyers also informed deportees of outrages experienced by convoys, abuses by camp officials, and offered advice and guidance to deportees. Such acts demonstrate the breadth of the efforts to organize and resist the authorities, against all odds and up until the camps were liquidated.⁵⁷

The massacres in Ras ul-Ain and Der Zor in March and August-October 1916 – a second wave of genocide after the near elimination of the entire Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire – have defied attempts at scholarly interpretation. Some scholars have avoided addressing them altogether, relegating the "disappearance" of tens of thousands of people in the desert to footnotes or ignoring it entirely, while addressing the Ottoman policies of demographic engineering in a more sanitized manner. Others have argued that a second decision was made in early 1916 to eliminate the Armenian deportees in the region, with the massacres of Ras ul-Ain in March serving as a harbinger for what was to come later that

thousands of Armenian deportees": H. Kaiser, 2009, p. 31. Realistic or not, the ordinance was drafted to give a semblance of legitimacy to the deportations.

52. Made of flimsy cloth, unstable, many riddled with holes, these tents were only a meager improvement over sleeping in the open. "Rickety tents made out of thin, torn canvas were not good enough to protect the people inside from the harsh weather conditions," recounted survivor Odian, who was at the Sebil camp near Aleppo in December 1915. Y. Odian, 2009, p. 99.

53. When Fr. Dadjad Arslanian arrived in the Sebil camp in late November 1915, "it was raining non-stop. Not having a tent, I was kindly invited into the tent of Mikayel Beylerian of Ovacik." BNU/Andonian, Folder 42: "The situation in Bab during the last *sevkiyat* in 1916," The deportation of Armenians of Bab, 6. See also, R. Kévorkian, 1998, p. 87.

54. See, for example, H. Seropian, 2005, p. 106-107.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

56. G. Balakian, 2009, p. 247. Bribes were key to stay and, in the case of a fortunate few, to make it back to Aleppo. Most survivor accounts mention graft and many

survived the genocide thanks in large part to bribery. “The poor people couldn’t do anything. There was only one way to salvation: if they had the financial resources, they could satisfy the camp official, so that he would be lenient with them,” explained Seropian. H. Seropian, 2005, p. 109. The Seropians and five other families from Konya collected 100 Ottoman liras and gave the amount to camp director Huseyin Avni to avoid redeportation temporarily. Arsenian, too, paid bribes simply to remain in the Meskeneh camp while he was sick. He wrote, “[W]e sent payments to the officials, so that during my illness they would not touch us and would not dismantle our tents.” H. Arsenian, 2011, p. 109.

57. BNu/Andonian, Folder 52b: “Handwritten Armenian flyers in Meskeneh,” f. 86. For more details, see Mouradian, 2015, p. 51.

year. Still, a detailed picture of the process that led to the Der Zor massacres remained elusive.

As we have seen, when the first deportees arrived in Ottoman Syria, more massacres a year later were far from being a forgone conclusion. The local authorities adopted *ad hoc* policies of dealing with the deportee influx until the center focused its attention on Ottoman Syria in fall 1915, and IAMM took control of the process of re-deportation and settlement. It is in this period that a clear policy of preventing the surviving deportees from engaging in humanitarian resistance and reconstituting viable communities was unleashed. Still, there was no attempt at the physical extermination of the remnants of the Armenian nation through massacres. For the central authorities, it was imperative that the Armenians do not spread epidemics throughout the region, and that they die alone in camps. Yet by early 1916, Ittihadist leaders saw that demographic engineering cannot be left to the forces of nature alone. Too many Armenians had survived and were scattered in a sparsely populated region, where they constituted significantly higher percentages than the 10 percent threshold. They were caught between important military supply lines and urban areas, making their redistribution in the region unrealistic. For them, mass murder resolved the problem.

By fall 1916, relative calm reigned in the triangle formed by Aleppo, Ras ul-Ain, and Der Zor. Most camps were entirely emptied, and the Armenian deportees had by and large “disappeared.” Thousands still survived, albeit in pitiable condition, in camps and villages along the Damascus-Hama line, or in coastal areas. But they constituted an insignificant proportion of the population, and were allowed to survive physically – but not as communities – if they could. When in early 1917, Talat received a telegram from the Aleppo governor about the anxieties of Armenians there regarding being deported, he asked the latter to reassure them that they would be spared.⁵⁸ Further action was no more necessary.

After the annihilation of the bulk of the surviving deportees in Ras ul-Ain and Der Zor, the central authorities believed they had accomplished their goal. Yet thanks to the humanitarian resistance waged in Ottoman Syria, thousands of Armenians survived and, in the decades that followed, reconstituted communities in Syria, Lebanon, and beyond.

58. BOA/DH.ŞFR 74/75, telegram from Talat to the Aleppo provincial authorities on 8 March 1917.

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