

# “Misilmenî”: Exploring Perceptions about Christian and “Muslim Armenians” in the Kurdish Community in Turkey.

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“Misilmenî”: Türkiye’de Kürt Toplumunda Ermeni ve  
“Müslüman Ermeni” Algısını Araştırmak

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**Citation/©:** Aras, Ramazan (2014). “Misilmenî”: Exploring Perceptions about Christian and “Muslim Armenians” in the Kurdish Community in Turkey, *Milel ve Nihal*, 11 (1), 91-117.

**Abstract:** This work attempts to go beyond discussions and metanarratives on the question of Armenians and explore the Kurdish perception of Armenians before and after the 1915. It examines diverse forms of state politics, constructedness of perceptions on Armenians and their role in manifestation of violence and massacre as justifiable act. This work, more specifically, investigates perceptions of the Sunni Kurdish community of Christian Armenians before 1915 and the perceptions of “Muslim Armenians” who emerged as a new entity after 1915. Based on some writings of Kurdish intellectuals before 1915, some key religious texts that have been widely read in the Kurdish Madrassas and personal memories and life stories of ordinary Kurdish subjects, this work claims that the diverse forms of politics of the state and manufactured anti-Christian discourses based on religion (Islam) played an essential role in the formation of the negative perceptions toward both Christian and “Muslim Armenians”.

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\* The first version of this paper was presented at the International Conference on Islamized Armenians at Boğaziçi University in İstanbul, November 2-4, 2013.

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**Key Words:** Memory, Perception, Identity, State, WWI, Armenians, Kurds, "Muslim Armenians".



**Atıf/©:** Aras, Ramazan (2014). "Misilmenî": Türkiye'de Kürt Toplumunda Ermeni ve "Müslüman Ermeni" Algısını Araştırmak, *Milel ve Nihal*, 11 (1), 91-117.

**Öz:** Bu çalışma Ermeni meselesi üzerine mevcut olan tartışmaların ve genel/hakim anlatıların ötesine geçmeyi ve 1915 öncesi ve sonrasında Kürtlerin Ermeni algısını araştırmayı çabalamaktadır. Devletin farklı siyaset formlarını, Ermeniler hakkındaki algıların kurgulanmışlığını ve bunların şiddet ve katliamların savunulabilir eylemler olarak tecelli edilmesinde oynadıkları rolü incelemektedir. Bu çalışma, daha da spesifik olarak, 1915 öncesi dönemde Sünni Kürt toplumunda Hıristiyan Ermeniler hakkındaki algıları ve özellikle 1915 sonrası dönemde yeni bir varlık/kimlik olarak ortaya çıkan "Müslüman Ermeniler" hakkındaki algıları araştırmaktadır. 1915 öncesi dönemdeki bazı Kürt entellektüellerin yazılarına, Kürt medreselerinde yaygın bir şekilde ve uzun zamandır okutulan bazı temel dini metinlere ve sıradan insanların hayat hikayeleri ve anlatılarına dayanan bu çalışma, devletin farklı siyaset formlarının ve dine (İslama) dayandırılarak üretilmiş olan Hıristiyan karşıtı söylemlerin Kürtler arasında hem Hıristiyan Ermeniler hem de "Müslüman Ermeniler" hakkındaki negatif algıların inşa edilmesinde önemli bir rol oynadıklarını iddia etmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Hafıza, Algı, Kimlik, Devlet, I. Dünya Savaşı, Ermeniler, Kürtler, "Müslüman Ermeniler"

## Introduction

The First World War not only resulted in the fall of the Ottoman Empire and deconstruction of political systems that endured for centuries, and the emergence of new nation-states in the post-war era; it also resulted in traumatic repercussions among communities living in the Ottoman territories. As a result of the mass violence, counter-violence, deportations, and terror of both the state apparatuses and counter nationalist movements, the centuries old social fabric of multi-ethnic and multi-religious communities was severely damaged and mostly destroyed. There were dramatic changes in the social, economic, and ethno-religious demographic structures in different regions particularly in Anatolia due to the catastrophic impacts of the war that resulted in extermination, deportation, forced migration, and the loss of hundreds of thousands of ordinary people from all communities. The physical and psychological impacts of these events, felt in all communities with loss and agony, have become fundamental markers of modern Turkish history. They have

left very deep scars on social bodies whose impacts are still felt today at both subjective and collective levels.

WWI left thousands of orphans and lost children behind from many communities but, particularly the Armenian community. The emergence of enmity based on ethnic, religious, and nationalist discourses shattered communal ties and pushed certain nationalist groups toward radicalization and the perpetration of violent acts toward their neighbors who were recoded as “rival enemies”. These acts were often legitimized and given consent through the employment of a “politics of fear” (Ahmed 2003) and the manufacturing of legitimizing nationalist discourses for acts of violence. In this article, the main focus is to investigate and analyze the historical roots of Kurdish perceptions of Armenians and how these negative perceptions were formulated and then re-fabricated through time. Moreover, it aims to explore how these perceptions were sometimes used and abused by statist political apparatuses in their marginalization of not only Christian Armenians, but also Islamized and “Muslim Armenians”<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, there has been an urgent need for conducting researches on the question of how Armenian subjects also perceived neighboring Muslim subjects (Kurds and Turks) by other researchers working on these issues. How did they see and perceive each other? What kinds of counter-discourses, and ideologies that produced emotions of hate, anger and revenge toward Muslim subjects were incorporated into the nationalist and separatist discourses of Armenian groups? How were these nationalistic sentiments fueled and disseminated among ordinary members of the Armenian community, particularly in the eastern part of the Anatolia? Investigations based on these questions will enable us to learn more about the formation of minds, mentalities, and ideologies that alienated these neighboring communities before, during, and after WWI.

Firstly, some writings of Kurdish intellectuals and their discourses before the war that address the Armenian question from different angles will be examined to find some answers to such questions concerning hatred and enmity in the region. Aside from

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<sup>1</sup> Here, I am using the term Islamized Armenians to refer to those young, adult Armenians who willingly or unwillingly converted to Islam during and after the massacres. Later, I prefer to use the term Muslim Armenians for those Armenian orphans and children who were raised as Muslims, their children and grandchildren in the present.

these writings and discourses, counter-nationalistic discourses like those of missionaries who spread separatist feelings, and created and disseminated a fear of an independent Armenian nation-state, the influences of widely-circulated narratives about the cruelties of Armenian nationalist troops toward the Muslim population in the eastern part of the country, and other socio-political and economic factors will be emphasized in the analysis of the creation of hostility and hatred. Here, I want to clarify that I am not assuming that there were not any socio-political conflicts between these communities during the Ottoman rule. For centuries, diverse problems and conflicts of interest were occurring not only between different religious and ethnic communities (as in the case of Muslim Kurds and Christian Armenians) but also between Muslim communities and Muslim Kurdish tribes as well.

Secondly, it is argued that religion (Islam) was also (mis)used as an instrument in the production of hate, antagonism and anger toward Christian subjects (Armenians and Assyrians as the “others”) by statist, local actors and bigoted groups<sup>2</sup>. As a case in this point, some religious texts (books of *fikh* [Islamic jurisprudence]) that have been widely read by thousands of students in the Kurdish madrassas for centuries will be scrutinized.

The (dis)continuity of negative perceptions about Muslim Armenians is questioned in the last part. As we learn from the writings of some Kurdish intellectuals, life stories and personal accounts of Kurds and Muslim Armenians and other resources, the Armenian

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<sup>2</sup> Macit Kenanoğlu has stated in his influential work *Osmanlı Millet Sistemi – Mit ve Gerçek* (The Ottoman Millet System: Myth and Reality) that “according to the main principles of the Islamic law, dhimmis (zimmiler) are not a group of people to be subjected to ordeals, disrespect, and discrimination. On the contrary, they have the same rights as Muslims as they do not bring any harm to Muslims.” (Kenanoğlu 2004, 23). In his enlightening work, Kenanoğlu describes the Ottoman *iltizam* system and documents how legal principles in this system created a protective domain for non-Muslim subjects in spite of unwanted regulations and some principles in practice. I agree that Islamic law has acknowledged the rights and freedom of non-Muslim subjects since the early periods of Islamic history compared to the Western legal system that started to acknowledge rights and freedom of non-Christian subjects just recently in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Kenanoğlu 2004). However, it is essential to accept that diverse practices of Islamic law and principles and differing interpretations on the status of non-Muslim subjects by some Muslim scholars and religious leaders in the history of Islam sometimes – as in this case – played a role in shaping the minds of ordinary Muslim subjects.

community was outlawed as the “other” before and during 1915. Furthermore, “Armenianness” was defined and perceived as an “evil,” and as a marker of “infidelity” among Muslim communities. The homogenizing policies (Anderson 1983) of the new Turkish nation-state eventually resulted in the elimination of other ethnic and religious entities within its declared political borders. Due to this cruel process of manufacturing exclusionary discourses on the “other” (De Certeau 1986), Armenians were stigmatized as “traitors”. It is interesting to see how these kinds of negative perceptions about Christian Armenians were disseminated and directed toward Muslim Armenians in the post-1915 and in the present. In the argument and analysis of this issue below, the concept of *Misilmenî* is the key concept demarcating the frame of Kurdish perception of Muslim Armenians in the contemporary period.

### **I. The Making of Kurdish Mind(s): The Role of Kurdish Intellectuals in the 1900s**

It is not an easy undertaking to analyze changes, ruptures, and transformations in the Kurdish worlds in these critical times. One’s mind and world can be shaped and (re)made in multifold ways at both the subjective and collective levels. This suggests that there are fragmented and miscellaneous aspects of perceptions and mentalities that are formed in historical processes. In this context, making generalized and accurate statements about the impacts of Kurdish intellectuals on the Kurdish population in Istanbul and in the Kurdish populated areas in the Ottoman territories will be a reductionist one. Therefore, the role of Kurdish intellectuals and the dissemination of their thoughts through printed means (newspapers, journals, books etc.) among Kurdish people can be understood to be subject to a complex and high personal internalization process. This criticism aside, I still argue that the writings and statements of these intellectuals inform us about social and political circumstances in that era and that is why their statements are essential for understanding Kurds in that period.

To what extent were these writings influential in the lives of ordinary readers of newspapers and among the rest of the Kurdish community? Undoubtedly, we do not have any scale to measure this; however, as we learn from the letters of readers in newspapers

like *Kürdistan*<sup>3</sup> and the Newspaper of the Kurdish Society of Solidarity and Progress<sup>4</sup> (*Kürd Teavün Cemiyeti Gazetesi*<sup>5</sup>, hereafter KSSP newspaper), readers welcomed and passionately read the articles of authors on many hot issues and problems in that era (see *Kürdistan* 1991, 65). Kurdish authors discussed many critical issues and ongoing social and political events in the community as well. For instance, Ismail Hakkı Babanzade (1876–1934) emphasized the education of Kurdish people in his writings while Said Nursi (1878–1960) and others were warning Kurdish leaders and people not to collaborate with state actors in the region in their wrongdoings toward Armenians and other Christian people in the region. Said Nursi was an influential figure at that time and in touch with local people (1911).

When locally available newspapers such as *Kürdistan* and KSSP are examined, one of the most noteworthy aspects of their coverage is the way in which the writers criticize the state policies regarding the creation of enmity toward the Armenian community among Muslim subjects. However, in the 30<sup>th</sup> issue of *Kürdistan*, for instance, Jesuit missionaries were also harshly criticized and accused of producing hostility between Kurds and Armenians in *Kürdistan* (*Kürdistan* 1991, 81). In general, they criticize state actors for intervening in communal relations between Kurds and Armenians and creating hostility between Kurdish tribes. The Armenian question received tremendous coverage, particularly in *Kürdistan*. In the

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<sup>3</sup> *Kürdistan* newspaper was founded by Mikdad Midhat Bedirhan and published in both Kurdish and Turkish from 1898 to 1902. The first issue was published in April 22, 1898 in Cairo by Mikdad Midhat Bedirhan. As a four page newspaper, it was published in 31 issues. Issues 1 to 23 were published bi-weekly, and issues 24 to 31 were published monthly. Mikdad Mithad Bedirhan published issues 1 to 5 in Cairo. After his death his brother Abdurrahman Bedirhan took responsibility and published issues 6 to 19 in Geneva. Bedirhan moved due to political pressure from Hamidian regime. The newspaper moved to Cairo again and 20 to 24 were published there. Then, it moved to London again and issues 20 to 23 were published there. Later, issues 24 to 29 were published in Folkstone, and the last issues, 30 and 31, were published again in Geneva (*Kürdistan* 1991, 62-63).

<sup>4</sup> The Kurdish Society of Solidarity and Progress (*Kürd Teavün ve Terakki Cemiyeti*) was founded in Istanbul and rapidly open many local branches in other cities particularly in the cities (Diyarbakır, Van, Elaziz, Bitlis, Muş, Siirt etc.) in the Kurdish region.

<sup>5</sup> *Kürd Teavün ve Terakki Cemiyeti* newspaper was in circulation between 1908-1909 (1998).

many issues of *Kurdistan*, Abdurrahman Bedirhan (1868–1936)<sup>6</sup> criticizes both the Armenian side for their separatist intentions and the Kurds for their support of the Hamidian regime. In the 9<sup>th</sup> issue, he states: “Armenians are fed up with the oppression of the state and that is why they raise their voices and hands demanding their rights. But Kurds, due to their ignorance, started to kill Armenians. It is a sin for Kurds to kill them. You (to the Kurds) are more oppressed than Armenians, but due to your ignorance you are not aware of yourselves, you do not raise your voices...” (*Kürdistan* 1991, 94). In his writings in the 25<sup>th</sup> issue in 1900, he makes a call to the Kurds not to collaborate with Abdülhamidian regime in its campaign against Armenians:

To the Kurds... I do know that Armenians want to separate from the Ottomans and make Kurdish lands, Kurdistan, their sovereign lands. I know how much they are working on this and how they are trying to get European support, forming gangs and disseminating these kinds of ideologies among Armenian villagers... However, you should not believe that there will be an independent Armenian state in Kurdish lands... You should protect under your wings those innocent Armenians who do not support the acts and thoughts of those insurgent Armenians... Instead, you should rise against that regime (Hamidian regime, the state) who has been suppressing you by many means for 25 years... You should protect those weak and innocent Armenians and this is what Sharia of Islam orders... In your counterattacks, you should only be against nationalist Armenian groups or individuals, not the whole Armenian nation... (ibid. 445–448).

Abdurrahman Bedirhan, the chief editor of *Kurdistan*, in an article entitled “Kurds and Armenians” in the 26<sup>th</sup> issue of the newspaper, addresses how state actors intervened in relations between both communities and planted seeds of hate and hostility through diverse strategies such as empowering, training and arming particular Kurdish tribes for armed-operations against Armenians (*Kürdistan* 1991, 468). He documents violations and cruelties perpetrated by Hamidian troops that were recruited from particular Kurdish tribes as sharp shooters in the eastern borderlands of the Empire (*Kürdistan* 1991, 501–509, see also Klein 2011, Süphandağ 2006, Aytar 1992). For Bedirhan, the only solution for both Armenians and Kurds as

<sup>6</sup> For more detailed information about the biographies of Mikdat Midhat Bedirhan and Abdurrahman Bedirhan please see Malmisanij 2011.

two oppressed communities is to collaborate with each other and rise against the Hamidian regime (Kürdistan 1991, 470).

In the same vein, the Armenian question was discussed by many intellectuals in the KSSP newspaper. Seyyid Abdulkadir (1851–1925), as leader of the Kurdish association, and as one of the leading Kurdish figures in Istanbul, criticizes the former regime for its role in the creation of enmity between Kurds and their neighbors (KSSP newspaper 1998, 23; Malmîsanij 1999). In the writings of Kurdish intellectuals,<sup>7</sup> the question of Armenians is given considerable attention in different contexts, which indicates how the catastrophe of 1915 was actually presaged 6–7 years before and even 15 years in advance when considering the warnings of Bedirhan in 1900. Similar warning can be seen in the first declaration of the Kurdish association that appeared in the first issue of their newspaper. It states as its founding goals support for Kurdish peoples' democratic demands, needs; the pursuit of peaceful relations with other people; and the assurance of civilized negotiations with other people. The other people referred to in its founding goals were principally the Armenians (KSSP Newspaper 1998, 63).

İsmail Hakkı Babanzade,<sup>8</sup> in his article entitled “Kurds and Kurdistan” in the first issue of the newspaper, harshly criticizes the statist discourse of the Hamidian regime, which presumed a historically-constructed hostility between Kurds and Armenians. Babanzade asks his readers to forget the crimes perpetrated by the previous regime and talks about his dreams for a new future for

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<sup>7</sup> The most influential intellectuals and writers were Amedli Ahmed Cemil, Bediüzzaman Said-i Kürdi, Ercişli Ahmed Şevki, Cizreli Mehmet Tahir, Halil Hayali, Malatyalı Bedri, İsmail Hakkı Baban, Süleymaniyeli Seyfullah and Amedli Süleyman Nazif.

<sup>8</sup> İ. H. Babanzade was one of the influential Kurdish thinkers and politicians of the time. He became a new member of the newly formed Ottoman parliament in 1908 and MP of Baghdad. He travelled from Istanbul to Beirut and then to Kuwait during which time he tried to report his observations on social, political, and economic problems in the region (Babanzade 2002). As we learn from his travel letters published in the newspaper *Tanin* in 1908, the region was moving toward chaos step-by-step and that is why Babanzade warned the government in Istanbul to take urgent measures to address the problems in the region (Babanzade 2002, 12). The Armenian and Arab insurgencies during and after WWI were those that Babanzade actually foresaw in diverse ways in 1908.



Kurds, Armenians and other Ottomans under the reign of the new government formed in 1908. He asserts:

One of the aspersions on Kurds is that Kurds have always been in antagonism with Armenians and that Kurds have always been mortal enemies of Armenians. Up until the last period, there were never better neighbors than the Kurds and Armenians. Have there been any complaints from Armenians about Kurds till the events that happened in the last period?... If Kurds wanted to attack Armenians they would have done it a long time ago... Like the Ottomans, Kurds are also respectful of the faith, life, property and honor of non-Muslim citizens... (KSSP Newspaper 1998, 69).

Identical patterns of discourse can also be seen in the words of other intellectuals. In the writings of Seyyid Abdülkadir,<sup>9</sup> the Hamidian regime is defined as a troubling entity that manufactured enmity, hatred, and dissension between both communities. He reveals how the social fabric of Kurdistan was damaged by that regime (KSSP Newspaper 1998, 77). In his article entitled “Kurds and Armenians” in the 9<sup>th</sup> issue of the same newspaper, Hüseyin Paşazade Süleyman talks about a centuries-old neighborhood and the mutual support that existed between Kurds and Armenians in this neighborhood. He claims that peace for both communities is only possible if they collaborate again as they did in the past and unite against all state-sponsored conflicts and hostility (ibid. 461–463). As we can see from the writings of members of the Kurdish Society for Solidarity and Progress, they were trying to play a role in healing the wound in the social body that was caused by the conflictual policies of the Hamidian regime. By emphasizing their possible role in the reconstruction of unity between both communities, they show how some community leaders of both Kurdish and Armenian communities were willing to reach a compromise in the region (ibid. 127). At the same time, they make an urgent call for the immediate resolutions of economic and social problems in the region, asking the new government to make a move promote and facilitate reconciliation between both communities (ibid. 359).

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<sup>9</sup> Seyyid Abdülkadir (1851-1925) was the head of the Kurdish Society for Solidarity and Progress.

Said Nursi<sup>10</sup> also criticizes the former regime for its wrongdoings against both the Kurdish and Armenian communities in his writings of this era. In his work entitled *Münazarat* 2012[1911] which is based on his personal conversations with local people while traveling in Kurdistan, Nursi envisions a peaceful and content future based on the condition of having an alliance and friendship with the Armenian community. When ordinary Kurdish subjects ask him: “Armenians are treating us as their enemies and cheat on us. How can we have an alliance based on friendliness with them?” Nursi immediately responds to their question by saying that “The autocracy that was the base of hostility is gone (dead). Companionship will arise with the disappearance of despotism. I want to definitively say that the peace and happiness of this country depend on having an alliance and friendship with Armenians” (Nursi 2012[1911], 100–102).

To conclude, we do not know to what extent the writings and discourses of Kurdish intellectuals on Armenians were influential in the world(s) of the local Kurdish authorities and in the public. However, the events and massacres of 1915 can be seen as indications of how the state authorities along with local collaborators mostly superseded the efforts of Kurdish intellectuals. Moreover, researches based on archival resources and oral history accounts have documented collaborations between the state and local actors based on diverse social, political and economic interests (Aktar 2013a, 2013b, Aras 2011, 2013c, 2005, Aytar 1992, Kollektif 2009, Ritter and Sivaslian 2013, Balancar 2013, Kaiser 2014). The dominance of statist discourses and the accommodation of local elites to the interests of the Turkish state aside, I speculate that there were influences of Kurdish intellectuals - particularly Said Nursi – in the formation of Kurdish mind(s) when we consider the stories of protection of Armenians by their Kurdish neighbors against perpetrators (Aytar 1992, Aktar 2013a, 2013b, Aras 2005, 2013c).

The Kurdish intellectuals’ labor of shaping Kurdish mind(s) and world(s) through their writings and also conversations on diverse issues with ordinary Kurdish subjects – as in the case of Said

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<sup>10</sup> Said Nursi (1878–1960) appears as the most passionate defender of Kurdish rights and demands against the ruling government in this period. Nursi’s influence will reach its peak later in the Republican period and he will become the most prominent Muslim Kurdish scholar in Turkey.

Nursi and his conversations with ordinary people - were partially effective in Kurdish localities. While Kurdish educated figures and elites were seeing the future as a shared destiny with Armenians and other Christian subjects, some of the local leaders and actors were taking a statist standpoint by supporting the Hamidian regime and later the Young Turks government expecting political, social and economic benefits for their support. In the post-1915 era, negative perceptions about Armenians became more powerful at the grassroots level compared to the perceptions of intellectuals and educated elites. These negative discourses and perceptions were generated, disseminated, and directed not only toward Christian subjects but also toward Muslim Armenians, which we will analyze below. For me, there have been certain historically constructed political, social, and religious reasons behind these hostile oppositions and fragmentations. The discourses and practices that prepared the ground for the events and massacres in 1915 relied upon the continual activation of these reasons and the dissemination of statist discourses among which the use of religion as an instrument is an effective one.

## **II. The Impacts of Statist Discourses and the Politics of Marginalization**

Violence has largely been used as an apparatus by the state authorities in order to postpone diverse political demands based on ethnicity, religion, and other ideological demands. The state’s legitimization of the use of violence and its annihilating forms have been the most destructive one, as many researchers have demonstrated to us through their works (Cotta 1985, Gurr 1994, Malkki 1995, Giddens 1996, Daniel 1996, Gourevitch 1998, Feldman 1999, Green 1999, Bauman 1999, Mamdani 2001, Bozarslan 2004, Mann 2004). In their explorations of the origins of violence and genocide in Rwanda, anthropologists Mahmood Mamdani and Liisa Malkki emphasize the importance of examining politically constructed and polarized entities created by colonialist hegemonic powers. The formation of Tutsi and Hutu identities, both anthropologists explain, pushed both communities to the point where killing the “other” was seen as an indispensable act of survival (Mamdani 2001, 14, 34, Malkki 1995, 54, see also Aras 2013a, 2013b). In other words, the negatively constructed images of Tutsis that were circulated through

nationalist discourses of Hutus facilitated the process of dehumanization of Tutsis that ended in large-scale massacres. Malkki describes how the dehumanization of the “other”, the “Tutsi”, or the “Hutu”, legitimizes violence and gives the right to kill. According to Malkki, this mutually constructed intense hostility was fashioned by categorical forms in which the other was seen as a homogenous category of and source of “evil” (Malkki 1995, 54, see also Bauman 1999, Volkan 2001, 1991).

Following the argument above, I want to ask why people who lived under Ottoman rule – with a reference to *Millet* system or what Kenanoğlu names the *iltizam* system<sup>11</sup> - for centuries turned into angry perpetrators of violence. Michael Mann, in his work *The Dark Side of Democracy – Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*, answers a similar question through his analysis of diverse cases of political violence and ethnic cleansing that have occurred in the last two centuries in the modern world. Mann notes nine common motives that have been observed among perpetrators: ideological, bigoted, violent, fearful, careerist, materialist, disciplined, comradely and bureaucratic (Mann 2005: 28-29). Considering Mann’s results, it should be asked which of these motives played a role in mobilizing the state actors and ordinary people to participate in conducting the massacres in 1915.

First, the rule of Abdulhamid (Deringil 1998) and then the Turkish nationalist government of Young Turks, (Mardin 1964) were deeply fearful of the fall of the Empire. The dissemination of the perception that the Empire is under attack and then the exercise of the narrative “you are either with us or against us” (Ahmed 2003) by the rulers contributed to the formation of a binary antagonism - Muslims versus Christians - in that era. One of the indications of this binary opposition can be seen in the personal stories of Muslims and Christians where 1915 was defined as “*Fermana Filiha*” (Christian Decree). For them, it was a command given by the state authorities for the killing of not only Armenians but all Christian subjects. In my researches in the Assyrian community and with Muslim Armenians in Mardin and Batman, the term *Fermana Filiha* was frequently used to refer to the causes of the massacres. According to oral his-

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<sup>11</sup> For a detailed discussion on this issue see Kenanoğlu 2004.

tory studies conducted in the region of Mardin and Batman, the local Kurdish community remembers the events of 1915 as the time when the state officials declared the killing of Christians (*Filihs*). In their personal narratives, many elders narrate stories from their parents and talk about how they remember this time as the time of the “decree” given by the state officials (Aras 2005, 2011, 2013, Aktar 2013a, 2013b). We will now turning to analyzing how policy of keeping diverse ethnic and religious communities together under the umbrella of the Empire by Ottoman officials resulted in different catastrophes before, during and after WWI.

There are essential factors to be addressed that played a significant role in both the formative process of state policies and discourse and also the Kurdish perception of Armenians. The first issue is the nationalism that was prevalent among most of the elites of various communities in the Ottoman territories. These nationalistic discourses, through their use of essential categories, caused mutually exclusive stances on counternationalist sides (Arabs versus Turks, Turks versus Armenians, Armenians versus Kurds, etc.) (Deringil 1998; Haddad 1994, Kayalı 1997, Kıcıman 1994, Kuşçubaşı 1997). The conflicts between competing nationalist groups (Turkish, Arab, Armenian, Greek, Kurdish etc.) can be regarded as one of the reasons behind the tensions that would result in the catastrophes of WWI and 1915. The second factor is the role of missionaries in deterioration of Kurdish-Armenian relations through their dissemination of separatist feelings among Armenians. This separatist sentiments led to the creation of hatred toward Muslim subjects. In the lead up to 1915, Christian missionaries were seen as agents of Western powers who wanted to destroy the Islamic Empire (Açıkses 2003, Sezer 2001, Şahin 2005). These arguments can be seen widely in the statist discourses but I would add that the activities of missionaries contributed to the deterioration of the situation in the region. Christian enmity was met with Kurdish enmity. The writings of Kurdish intellectuals document the popularity of negative feelings among Kurds toward those missionaries (Kürdistan 1991, 81). The third factor was the dissemination of the idea that Armenians were going to found an Armenian state in Kurdistan. This idea was common during the pre-1915 era among Kurds (Karerli 2007).

What we learn from the writings of Kurdish intellectuals and other oral history sources was that there were widely circulated narratives about the cruelties of Armenian nationalist troops toward Muslim populations in the eastern part of the country. We can consider the existence of this statist discourse at the local level as evidence of the sympathy that communities felt for the statist position. However, as we learn from the oral history accounts, there were not only rumors, but also accurate news coverage about these Armenian troops and their cruelties against Muslim subjects in the eastern part of the country (Aras 2005, Parin 2010, Solmaz 2001, Aydemir 2011). My oral history research on the migration of Assyrian Christians has revealed the existence of Muslim Kurdish families from eastern Anatolia who escaped due to the attacks of Armenian troops living in Kerboran/Dargeçit, Mardin. The arrival of these displaced people (*muhacirler*) to the town was narrated with details of their starvation by elders. These acts of Armenian violence toward Muslims nourished emotions of revenge among local Muslim populations in other parts of Anatolia (Aras 2005, 2011, 2012). Today, these stories are still narrated and transferred to the new generations in family settings, thus contributing to the endurance of anti-Armenian (Christian) emotions in the region.

The state's use of a politics of fear (Ahmed 2003) and manufacturing of legitimizing nationalist discourses at both subjective and collective levels can be seen as another factor that made an important contribution to the making of a legitimizing framework for acts of violence. Armenian subjects were stigmatized as fearsome objects that were passionate about the destruction of the Empire and keen upon the foundation of an independent Armenian nation-state in the eastern part of the country, in the mostly Kurdish populated areas. This fear and thus possible elimination of Kurdish Muslim subjects was one of the instruments of both the state officials and Kurdish tribal notables that they used on ordinary Kurdish civilians in order to exacerbate anti-Armenian sentiments.

In the process of the formation of negative perceptions about Armenians some religious discourses were employed and misused against non-Muslims and sometimes against converts in the case of Islamized and Muslim Armenians. In this labor of the state apparatuses, the institution of religion has been the most influentially misused one against non-Muslim subjects. In most

cases, some state-backed religious leaders like sheikhs, Mollas, and others disseminated certain prejudices and injustices against Armenians and Assyrians/Syriacs in the region. Because of this misuse of religion, it is important to look at the character of relationships between these religious leaders and varied state actors. For instance, when we look at the case of the Naqshbandi order leader Sheikh Seyda (1889-1968)<sup>12</sup> we learn from ordinary Kurdish subjects who attended his sermons how a new set of restrictions were made between Muslims and Christians in the region in the 1950s and 1960s and how some of them were accepted and some not. According to both Muslim and Christian interviewees, it was stated by Sheikh that a Muslim should not eat their food, should not make close friendships with them, and should not trade with them, etc. (Aras 2005, 2011), which actually contradict statements in the Qur’an<sup>13</sup>. However, what were the reasons behind the promotion of these kinds of exclusive sermons and teachings?<sup>14</sup>

At this point, I want to draw attention to the impacts of some religious scholarly textbooks in the formation of these mentalities and discourses. I want to clarify that statements in these religious texts were not and have not been accepted and practiced by all members of Muslim Kurdish community. People do not always fol-

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<sup>12</sup> The Naqshbandi order leader Sheikh Seyda was based in Cizre, Şırnak. Thousands of local people were influenced by his sermons in the 1950s and 1960s. These sermons incited people to negative forms of behavior against Christian subjects.

<sup>13</sup> The Surah of Al-Ma’idah (5/5): “Today, all the good things of life have been made lawful to you. And the food of those who have been vouchsafed revelation aforesaid is lawful to you and your food is lawful to them. And [lawful to you are] in wedlock, women from among those who believe [in this divine writ], and, in wedlock, women from among those who have been vouchsafed revelation before your time – provided that you give them their dowers, taking them honest wedlock, not in fornication, nor as secret love-companions...” (Asad 2007).

<sup>14</sup> The relations between religious leaders (Sheikhs) and the state actors and politics behind their collaborations should be analyzed in future scholarly works. According to Martin van Bruinessen, as a result of political pressure on religious orders and the elimination of them by the Turkish state authorities, the majority of Sheikhs took refuge in Syria, Iraq and other places. However, “Sheikh Seyda did not flee but remained in Cizre and came to an understanding with the Turkish authorities” (van Bruinessen 1992, 336-338).

low what they have been taught by religious leaders in their everyday life. Nevertheless, these major texts had tremendous influence in the process of the formation of minds and mentalities. Some of the most well-known books are *Al-Minhac*<sup>15</sup> by Imam Nevevi (died 1277) and *Ğayet* by Ebu-Şüca (died 1075)<sup>16</sup>, which have been used for the education of thousands of Mollas at the Kurdish madrassas for centuries (Çiçek 2009, 70-71). As we know, the majority of these graduates of madrassas who were exposed to those teachings later becoming local religious authorities and responding to local peoples' questions on diverse social and political issues. According to both M. Halil Çiçek and Yunus Cengiz, who were both educated at the Kurdish madrasas, these texts were widely read and given great importance after the reading of the Qur'an in a sequence in the madrasas<sup>17</sup>. As they also stated, the importance of *Al-Minhac* comes from the fact that it is the most influential book of Islamic jurisprudence in the Shafii school of Sunni Islam, the school accepted and practiced by the majority of Muslim Kurds (Çiçek 2009, Cengiz 2013). Here, my main argument is that these ubiquitous discourses and thoughts were activated and brought forward in the labor of creating hate, fueling anti-Armenian sentiments, and dehumanizing Christian subjects during the conflict.

In the *Al-Minhac*, the statements about non-Muslim subjects (*zimmiler*), Christians and Jews, are very exclusionary and humiliating. In one part, it states that a non-Muslim should not construct a

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<sup>15</sup> *Al-Minhac*, as a book of law/jurisprudence, has been given more importance by Kurdish Mollas and Sheikhs. Imam Nevevi is one of the leading scholars and authorities of the Shafii school of Islam. *Al-Minhac* is one of the compulsory books in the education system of Kurdish madrassas. Students start to read it at the middle of their 7-year education. They complete the reading of it in nearly two years. It has been one of the principal books applied and used by Imams and Sheikhs while trying to solve problems/disputes and cases related to trade, marriage, properties, and many other legal matters (Cengiz 2013).

<sup>16</sup> *Ğayet* is also one of the basic texts of Islamic law and jurisprudence widely read and known in the Kurdish madrassas in Turkey. It is a short text based on the teachings of the Shafii school of Sunni Islam. It is introduced in the curriculum of maddrassas at the beginning of the curriculum. It is not only introduced to students of madrassas, but also to local children and teenagers who come to the mosques to learn reading the Qur'an in Arabic alphabet (Cengiz 2013).

<sup>17</sup> The interview with Yunus Cengiz (Assist. Prof.) was conducted on October 25, 2013 in the Department of Philosophy at Artuklu University in Mardin, Turkey.



building higher than the house of his Muslim neighbor, he/she should not mount a horse but mule or donkey, they should not come forward in a meeting place, they should not state their anti-Islamic statement of faith in the presence of Muslims, they should not drink and eat pork in the presence of Muslims etc. (Nevevi vol. 4, 249, 255-258). The fact that texts similar to this have been read and sometimes memorized by thousands of madrassa students and that these Mollas later became religious authorities and respected imams (preachers) in different parts of the Kurdish community can be seen as an important indicator for the dissemination of these negative statements among the Kurdish masses. According to my personal interviews with some elder madrassa graduates who served for decades as imams in different parts of the Kurdish region, what they knew was in the “*kitebs* (religious books) by making references to the texts like *al-Minhac*. The influential roles of imams and sheikhs as powerful figures who solved tribal and interpersonal conflicts, and mobilized masses in social and political affairs (van Bruinessen 1992, 210) suggests how their anti-Armenian (Christian) discourses might be persuasive in the community both in the past and also in the contemporary period. For these reasons, it is possible to speculate on their role in the formation of a Muslim perception of Christians in the Kurdish community. However, it should be remembered that there have also been other religious authorities who have repudiated and criticized these adverse statements at both local<sup>18</sup> and national levels (see Nursi 1911[2012] and van Bruinessen 1992).

The making of Armenians and other Christian subjects as unwanted, evil, sneaky, and the unfaithful “other” through statist discourses, religious ideologies and the use and abuse of religion has resulted in the formation of a commonly perceived negative image of Armenians in Turkey. The continuing hate and anger that is felt toward Armenians as an ethno-religious entity can be seen as a legacy of these state-sponsored discourses and politics that also sharpened the “us” and “them” dichotomy between Muslim and

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<sup>18</sup> For the differing approaches of Molla Ferhat (died 1958) and Sheikh Seyda (died 1968) toward Christian Assyrians see Aras 2005. In the collected narratives in this research, both Kerboranian Muslims and Christians remember Molla Ferhat, the first local imam of Kerboran, as a peaceful religious man who enjoyed congenial relations with the local Christian community and Sheikh Seyda as a religious authority who deteriorated relations between both communities.

Christian subjects. It can be argued that the social-engineering project of Turkish nation-state since 1923 which has been based mainly on Sunni Islam.<sup>19</sup> As such, non-Muslim subjects were mostly seen as “trouble making” entities. So, ethnic and religious entities whose integration (assimilation) into mainstream Turkish society was not seen as possible were targeted in diverse ways.

### III. A Challenging New Question: “Muslim Armenians”?

Armenian subjects (women, orphans, and kidnapped children) who survived in 1915 were left under the “protection” of Muslim families. As we learn from oral history accounts, most of the time, these Islamized Armenians faced unbearable disgust, loneliness, and marginalization in their host-family settings. They had to carry those stigmas of 1915 from one generation to the other. Furthermore, the second and third generations of Muslim Armenians – children of Islamized Armenians that emerged in the post-1915 era as a new entity - have suffered due to their Armenian roots despite their newly accepted and negotiated Muslim identities (Aktar 2013a, Aktar 2013b, Aras 2013c, 2012, Altınay and Çetin 2009, Çetin 2012). I have tried to trace the historical background of these negative perceptions and the social and political circumstances that prepared the ground for these negative perceptions before and during WWI. The continuity of these negative perceptions in the post-1915 period till the present can be seen as the legacy of that past. Here, the fundamental task is to understand connections and continuity between lingering negative perceptions of Christian Armenians and Muslim Armenians in the present.

More recent studies on Islamized and Muslim Armenians in Turkey (Çetin 2012, Altınay and Çetin 2009, Aras 2013, Başyurt 2010, Neyzi and Kharatyan-Araqelyan 2010, Arıkan 2005, Kollektif 2009), have revealed that there were thousands of orphans and kidnapped women and men taken into the protection of Muslim families after the events of 1915. The Islamization of Armenians who remained somehow in Anatolia after 1915 occurred in two different ways.

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<sup>19</sup> Although the Turkish nation-state project has been a secular one, religion and religious affairs were and have been carried out under the umbrella of the *Diyanet*, a state-bounded institution organizing religious affairs based on Sunni Islam, especially the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam). The state authorities aimed to control religion as an institution through the formation of the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*) in 1924.

While small children were raised as Muslims in a Muslim family settings, the elders and adults were willingly, or reluctantly converting to Islam. In the latter case, most Armenians who were forced to convert returned to their Christian faith when allowed, or when they found a way to do it (escaping, migrating etc.). In some cases, they practiced their Christian faith secretly (Altınay and Çetin 2009, Simonian 2007, Bulut 2010, Aktar 2013a, 2013b, Aras 2005, 2013c). As we know from some personal narratives and life stories of first generation Muslim Armenians, most of the time their parents as new members of the Muslim community, were not appreciated and welcomed due to the historically rooted and constructed biases and prejudiced beliefs about their Christian past. Through my ethnographic investigations and oral history studies in the region, 1915 has not only become a breaking point in the history of the region, but also in the Kurdish perception of Armenians.

To what extent were these negative perceptions of Armenian (Christians) among Kurds were also directed toward Islamized Armenians? What are the connection(s) between pre-1915 and after? Based on oral history accounts collected during resarch on Muslim Armenians in Batman and Mardin, I have argued that the impact of the stigmatization of Armenian subject as “*xâîn*” (traitor) and “*gawûr*” (infidel) before and during WWI continued in the post-1915 era. Armenian orphans, kidnapped children, men and women who were left behind, most of the time, faced oral and physical attacks due to their Christian past. These remnants of 1915 had to painfully recognize the fact that they had to carry those stigmas and the burden of having Armenian roots in their personal/family lives for generations (Aras 2013c).

What is understood from the life stories of Muslim Armenian subjects is that there has been a continuity of the marginalization of Armenians, whether Muslim or Christian, from the past to the present at certain levels. However, we cannot make a generalized claim that all Armenian subjects faced the same negative treatment. There have also been numerous Armenian subjects who were welcomed in their new Muslim family settings. There are numerous stories of adopted Armenian children who were raised and treated as the children of these families. In spite of all these different cases and historical realities, Muslim Armenians are still facing discriminatory treatment in the mainly Kurdish community. In some cases, the life

stories of Muslim Armenians reveal how they face a discriminatory language from their Kurdish neighbors during conflicts in their everyday life.

As I stated before, the concept of *Misilmenî* which is used to refer to Christians (Armenians and Assyrians/Syriacs) who converted to Islam can be seen as a litmus test for continuation of effects of those stigmas and biases. The oral history studies on this issue have shown how Muslim Armenians have been named and are being called *Misilmenî* instead of *Müslüman* (Muslim) in some parts of the Kurdish community (in the Kurdish populated cities of Mardin, Siirt, Şırnak, Batman etc.). During my exploration of the concept of *Misilmenî*, I have recognized and understood from my interviewees that this concept is defined and used as a softened version of the concept of *Müslüman* (Muslim). In other words, it is used for a state of incomplete Islamization. One of the reasons behind this perception is the complexity of conversion processes during and after 1915 (Aras 2013c). The fact that many young and adult Armenian men and women converted to Islam forcibly later resulted in a general suspicion about their conversion. Did they really convert or were they just pretending to be Muslims? The state of not being sure about a complete and sincere conversion among Muslims aggravated biases toward these new members of the Muslim community, particularly in the early decades after 1915 (see Aras 2013c, Aktar 2013a, 2013b).

Today, it is possible to claim that the effects of these stigmas and suspicions have diminished toward second and third generation of Muslim Armenians. People around them know the truth about their roots, but they generally ignore it, or even forget about it. Therefore, Muslim Armenians are not usually referred to as *Misilmenî* in everyday life. The use of this concept and other stigmas and assault-like definitions by Kurdish Muslim subjects are mostly observed during conflicts or disputes with Muslim Armenians in everyday life. That is why Muslim Armenians talk about visible and invisible discriminatory forms of behaviors and discourses toward them in everyday life in their personal narratives (Aras 2013c).

The definitions used to define Muslim Armenians and also Muslim Assyrians illustrate how these biases were historically constructed. The use of the term *bavfilih* (those who have Christian ancestors) is another concept like *Misilmenî*, which can clearly be

seen as another way of discriminating against and excluding Muslim Armenians. It also indicates the legacy of memories of 1915. Otherwise, how can we explain the suspicions about one’s faith, despite the fact that he/she continually expresses and practices that faith.

Here, I claim that this perception is expressed as a generalized suspicion and lack of trust toward Muslim Armenians in some parts of the Kurdish community for several additional reasons. For example, the re-conversions to Christianity that were commonly seen among forcibly converted Armenians in the early years after 1915 can be seen as one of the reasons. However, the main reason resides in the legacy of the dehumanization of Armenians before and during 1915. This dehumanization has continued and can be seen in its contemporary form in the fabricated spiteful attributes of Armenianness used by the state apparatuses and local state actors. Nevertheless, it is not easy to observe these negative perceptions due to their (in) visibility in the contemporary period. They surface during conflicts on daily social and political affairs, residing in the Kurdish mindset. In most cases, they are hidden but whispered at certain levels.

### **Conclusion**

In this article the Armenian question and the catastrophes lived during WWI and 1915 are scrutinized from a different angle. Going beyond meta-narratives on the Armenian question, I have attempted to investigate the process of the formation of minds and mentalities that dragged these neighboring communities into bloody conflicts before, during and after WWI. In the literature on this hot topic in contemporary Turkey, there is lack of knowledge about the nature of socio-political and economic relationships between Kurds and Armenians in these critical times in the eastern and southeastern part of the country. Therefore, the main objective of this research is to ask questions about the ways in which these communities came to a point of killing each other as an “admissible” act. The sources that are examined and analyzed in this work help us to understand the role of state policies, the use and abuse of religious texts and figures by the state and local actors and other social and political factors in the labor of fabricating negative perceptions about Armenians in the Kurdish community in the past. Moreover, the arguments developed above provide some clues to us about how

these negative perceptions and unpleasant treatment of Christian subjects were transferred to and directed at Armenians who were Islamized during and after 1915. Today, it is interesting to see how these deeply engrained perceptions and behaviors are directed toward the second and third generations of Muslim Armenians (and also Muslim Assyrians) who survived WWI and 1915.

In short, the state-backed politics of exclusion of non-Turkish and non-Muslim communities have resulted in the absence of their voices and histories from the past to the present until recently. Facing the cruelties and massacres conducted in the past is one of the stages of healing in the post-conflict communities. Therefore, exploring and understanding these issues will not only make a modest contribution to unwritten history of marginalized people in Turkey, but it will help us to acknowledge the past and be wary of the capabilities of human beings for evil acts. It would be beneficial for the state to design new policies in order to avoid similar catastrophes in the future.

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### Geniřletilmiř Özet

1915 sorusu ve geride kalan Ermeniler meselesi modern Türkiye tarihinin üzerinde en çok tartiřma ve arařtırma yapılan meselelerden biri olagelmiřtir. Bu çalıřma, bütün bu tartiřmaların ve hakim anlatıların ötesine geçerek, 1915 öncesinde, sırasında ve sonrasında Kürt toplumunda Ermeni algısının nasıl olduđunu arařtırmaktadır. Daha da ötesi, 1915'teki řiddet eylemlerinin ve katliamların gerçekleştirilmesinde inřa edilen bu algıların nasıl bir rol oynadıđını ve 1915 sonrasında bu algıların "Müslüman Ermeniler" bağlamında devam eden etkilerini sorgulamaktadır. Bu kritik dönemlerde, Kürtler ile Ermeniler arasındaki iliřkiler hakkında ne kadar bilgi sahibiyiz? Bu iki toplum birbirini öldürmenin meřru bir eylem olduđuna inanma ve bunu icra etme ařamasına nasıl geldi ya da getirildiler? ,

İstanbul merkezli kültürel ve siyasal faaliyetler içinde olan bazı Kürt entellektüellerin 1915 öncesi yazıları analiz edilerek – özellikle Kürdistan 1898-1902 ve Kürd Teavün ve Terakki Cemiyeti Gazetesi 1908-1909'inde yer alan yazılar - Kürt entellektüellerin söylemlerinde ortaya çıkan Ermeni algısının nasıl olduđu ortaya çıkarılmıřtır. Ancak söylem ve algıların yerel düzlemde yani Kürt illerinde nasıl bir tepki ile karřıladıđına dair elimizde kesin bir veri bulunmamakta her ne kadar bu gazetelerde bazı okuyucu mektupları yer

alsada. İkinci olarak, Kürt medreselerinde yaygın olarak okutulan El-minhac gibi bazı önemli dini metinler incelenerek bu metinlerde yer alan Hıristiyan karşıtı söylemlerin – ki bazı fıkıh kitaplarına da esas oluşturmuştur – medreselerde okuyan fakihler ve yerli halk üzerindeki etkileri sorgulanarak bu metinlerin ve imamların söylemlerinin Hıristiyan (Ermeni) karşıtı algıların oluşması sürecinde etkili olduğu vurgulanmaktadır. Bu çalışma, özellikle, son dönemlerde yaşayan sıradan yaşlı Kürtlerin ve imamların bireysel hatıratları ve hayat hikayelerine de dayanarak, devletin farklı siyaset formlarının ve dine (İslama) dayandırılarak üretilen Hıristiyan karşıtı söylemlerinin hem Hıristiyan hem de daha sonra Müslüman Ermenilere karşı olumsuz algıların oluşturulması sürecinde etkili olduklarını iddia etmektedir. Daha doğrusu, bugün, Müslüman Ermenilere karşı Kürt toplumunda var olan olumsuz yargı ve algıların 1915 ve öncesinde Ermeniler ve Ermenilik üzerinde oluşturulan olumsuz sıfat ve algıların bir devamı olduğunu ifade etmektedir. 1. Dünya savaşı ve 1915 olaylarının bir mirası olan bu olumsuz algıların günümüz Kürt toplumunda hala görünür ve etkili olmasında hem devletin farklı mekanizmalarının hem de yerel siyasi ve dini aktörlerin önemli rolleri vurgulanmaktadır.

Bu çalışma, modern Türkiye tarihine damgasını vurmuş ve hala yüzleşilmemiş bir geçmişe sahip olan Ermeni meselesini farklı bir perspektifle irdelemeyi hedeflemektedir. Bu meselede ortaya konan bir çok tartışmanın ötesine geçerek, bu çalışma 1915 olaylarını ve şiddeti mümkün ve meşru hale getiren sosyal, siyasal, ekonomik ve dini faktörlere vurgu yaparak Ermeni karşıtı psikolojik, düşünsel ve dini algıların nasıl inşa edildiği sorusunu sormaktadır. Ve bu nefret söylemi ve algısının 1915 sonrasında ortaya çıkan Müslüman Ermenilere yönelik olarak sinsi bir şekilde nasıl yeniden üretildiğini ve devam eden etkilerini gündeme taşımaktadır.

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# MİLEL VE NİHAL

inanç, kültür ve mitoloji araştırmaları dergisi

Cilt/Volume: 11 Sayı/Number: 1 Ocak – Haziran / January – June 2014

ISSN: 1304-5482

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Ladin Ofset - İstanbul, Mart 2015

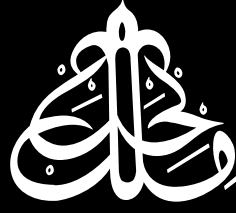
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ISSN: 1304-5482

Cilt/Volume: 11 Sayı/Number: 1  
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