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RASULAIN AND THE ARADA STEPPE DURING THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE, JULY 1915 – APRIL 1916

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In 1998, Raymond Kévorkian's article "Le Sort des déportés dans les camps de concentration de Syrie et de Mésopotamie" put the so-called "destination areas" in the focus of research on the Armenian Genocide. Officially, the Ottoman government intended settling Armenian deportees, primarily in Zor district. In reality, the deportees were starved to death, abandoned to the desert or massacred.

On the basis of official Ottoman documentation and rare first-hand evidence from the Chechen community of Rasulain, this article shows that district governor Ali Suad Bey initiated some limited relief and settlement projects. The central authorities, however, undid these efforts. At the same time, local Chechens opposed the settlement of Armenians as it interfered with their economic interests. They drew on an impressive network of contacts, denouncing alleged Armenian revolutionaries. In the end, the Chechens played a key role in the massacre of the deportees.

Key words: Armenian Genocide, Rasulain, Tchetchens, Baghdad Railway, Ali Suad Bey, George Sukkar, Hagop Nersessian

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Introduction

Over the past 25 years, research on the extermination of Ottoman Armenians has made significant progress. Case studies have contributed to a deeper understanding of the crime, offering more nuanced analyses of its complexities. These studies have explored major deportation routes and massacre sites along the path to the so-called “destination areas” in the Ottoman desert regions.¹ Discussions on the fate of Armenians in these desert areas have become another central theme of scholarly inquiry.² The Ottoman authorities maintained that, with few exceptions, Armenians would be resettled in the independent districts of Zor and Urfa, as well as in the Aleppo, Syria, and Mosul provinces, which today encompass parts of Jordan, Syria, and Iraq. This paper examines the events surrounding the short-lived settlement of Armenians in the Rasulain sub-district of Zor district, spanning from the summer of 1915 to the end of district governor Ali Suad Bey’s term in April 1916. It focuses on the policies of the Ottoman government and the influence exerted by local administrators and notables in shaping the implementation of these policies.

Ottoman settlement projects were not a new concept. In the 1860s, the Ottoman government had sent Chechen refugees from the Caucasus to the edge of the desert at Rasulain. The authorities aimed to assert greater control over the region by introducing settlers who would be reliant on government support. These newcomers were expected to counterbalance the influence of predominantly nomadic Kurdish and Bedouin tribes. However, the plan failed disastrously due to insufficient resources and inadequate government support. Most of the settlers succumbed to disease, and the surviving Chechens, far from complying with the government’s plans, became a source of instability by violently pursuing their own interests.³

* I am indebted to Mihran Minassian for his generous support and to colleagues at the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, Yerevan, for their assistance with Armenian language materials.

¹ Raymond Kévorkian, *Le génocide des arméniens* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2006); Aram Arkun, “Zeytun and the Commencement of the Armenian Genocide,” in *A Question of Genocide Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Ronald Suny, Fatma Göçek, and Norman Naimark (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 221-243; Hilmar Kaiser, “‘A Scene from the Inferno’: The Armenians of Erzerum and the Genocide, 1915-1916,” in *The Armenian Genocide and the Shoah*, ed. Hans-Lukas Kieser and Dominik Schaller (Zürich: Chronos, 2002), 129-186.

² Raymond Kévorkian, “Le Sort des déportés dans les camps de concentration de Syrie et de Mésopotamie,” *Revue d’histoire arménienne contemporaine* 2 (1998): 7–61.

³ Eugen Wirth, “Die Rolle tscherkessischer „Wehrbauern“ bei der Wiederbesiedlung von Steppe und Ödland im Osmanischen Reich,” *Bustan* 1 (1963): 16-19; Kemal Karpat, “The Status of the Muslim Under European Rule: The Eviction and Settlement of the Çerkes,” *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 1, no. 2 (1979): 7-27;

By August 1915, a population of 2,990 Muslims was recorded in Rasulain and its surroundings. The Chechens, numbering 726, were a minority but controlled the villages. Only 89 Arabs had permanent residences, while the vast majority of the Arab population remained nomadic. Thus, the scale of the alleged Armenian settlement plan far exceeded any previous projects in the region but suffered from a complete lack of preparation.⁴

The deportation of Armenians and their resettlement in what was once called the “fertile crescent” formed part of a broader scheme. After its defeat in the Balkan Wars, the Ottoman state faced a massive refugee crisis with Muslims flooding into Constantinople. Given its past record and the dire state of public finances, the government once again failed to adequately provide for these arrivals. However, in line with its ideological goals, the ruling Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) viewed the refugee crisis as an opportunity for demographic engineering. It exacerbated the situation by encouraging even more Muslims to leave the Balkans for the Ottoman Empire.

The crisis deepened in 1915, as waves of predominantly Kurdish refugees fled districts along the eastern front. The deportation and annihilation of Armenians were seen as a solution to this compounded refugee crisis. Alongside the deportations came the systematic expropriation of Armenian property. In theory, the plunder was intended to provide the government with arable land, gardens, seeds, houses, livestock, farming equipment, tools, and even household items such as kitchenware and clothing to support incoming Muslim refugees. By design, this process left Armenians with almost nothing when they were forced to leave their homes.⁵

Most of the deportees who survived massacres and the death marches from the eastern provinces ended up in what would become a vast killing field: the Zor district and adjacent sub-

Max Freiherr von Oppenheim, *Vom Mittelmeer zum Persischen Golf. Durch den Hauran, die Syrische Wüste und Mesopotamien*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1900), 78; Mark Sykes, *Dar-ul-Islam. A Record of a Journey Through Ten of the Asiatic Provinces of Turkey* (London: Bickers & Son, 1904), 283-286; *The Caliphs' Last Heritage. A Short History of the Turkish Empire* (London: Macmillan, 1915), 327-328; British Library, India Office Records and Private Papers, L/MIL/17/15/41/1, Admiralty War Staff Intelligence Division: *Handbook of Mesopotamia*, vol. 1 (1916), 78; Samuel Dolbeer, *Locusts of Power: Borders, Empire, and Environment in the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 45-52, 153.

⁴ DH.Sicill-i Nüfus.Müteferrik (DH.SN.M) 238-78, Rasulain, Aug. 25, 1915.

⁵ Fuat Dündar, *Crime of Numbers: The Role of Statistics in the Armenian Question (1878-1918)* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010); Hilmar Kaiser, “Armenian Property, Ottoman Law and Nationality Policies During the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1916,” in *The First World War as Remembered in the Countries of the Eastern Mediterranean*, ed. Olaf Farschild, Manfred Kropp, and Stephan Dähne (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2006), 46-71.

districts, such as Meskene in Aleppo province and Rakka in the Urfa district.⁶ Relatively few Armenians reached Mosul province. Larger groups of deportees arrived in the Ottoman districts of Hama, Karak, and Hauran in Syria province, although their numbers were far smaller compared to those in the wider Zor region. Accurate numbers of arrivals remain difficult to determine due to the scarcity of reliable data, as authorities frequently redirected deportees to different locations. For instance, an Armenian deportee might initially be forced to march to Rasulain in Zor district, only to be subsequently sent on to Aleppo, Hama, or further south.⁷

On 23 May 1915, the central government issued more specific instructions regarding the settlement areas, stipulating that they must be at least 25 kilometers away from any railway line. In the destination areas this provision excluded nearly all major cities and their surroundings. Consequently, local authorities were forced to improvise responses to the influx of deportees, but their efforts were grossly inadequate given the scale of the emergency. From the outset, the governors of Aleppo and Zor raised alarms, urgently requesting additional guidance and funding. In Aleppo, the local Armenian community, with the support of Governor Djelal Bey, formed a committee to assist deportees by organizing provisions, securing permanent housing, and finding employment. The Ministry of Interior (*Dahiliye Nezareti*, hereinafter DH) dispatched Kapancızade Hamid Bey, a senior official of the Ministry of Interior's General Directorate of Board of Investigation (*Heyet-i Teftişiye Müdüriyet-i Umumiyesi*, hereafter HTMU), to Aleppo to oversee the deportations. Hamid Bey supported the settlement efforts and even contributed from his private funds to the Armenian committee's work. Despite the goodwill of some officials and the dedicated efforts of the Armenian community, the situation in and around Aleppo deteriorated rapidly. Resources were simply insufficient to feed the destitute, let alone to settle all of them.⁸

⁶ DH.Şifre Kalemi (ŞFR) 53-91, Minister to Mosul Prov., Urfa, Zor Distr., May 23, 1915; 53-92, Minister to Adana, Aleppo prov., Marash distr., May 23, 1915; 53-94, Minister to 4th Army Command, May 23, 1915.

⁷ Hilmar Kaiser, "Ottoman Rule and Genocide in Mosul Province," in *Armenians of Iraq*, ed. Antranig Dakessian (Beirut: Haigazian University Press, 2021), 83-154; "The Armenian Deportees in Hauran and Karak Districts During the Armenian Genocide" in *Armenians of Jordan*, ed. Antranig Dakessian (Beirut: Haigazian University Press, 2019), 39-105.

⁸ DH.ŞFR 53-91, Minister to Mosul Prov., Urfa, Zor Distr., May 23, 1915; 53-92, Minister to Adana, Aleppo prov., Marash distr., May 23, 1915; Auswärtiges Amt, Politisches Archiv (AA-PA) Türkei 183/38, A 24658, "Bericht von Schwester Laura Möhring, die auf der Heimreise von Bagdad diese Vertriebenen in der Wüste traf", copy, enclosure in Schuchardt to AA, Frankfurt, Aug. 20, 1915; Vahram L. Shemmassian, "Humanitarian Intervention by the Armenian Prelacy of Aleppo During the First Months of the Genocide," *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies* 22 (2013): 127-152; Hilmar Kaiser, "Regional Resistance to Central Government Policies: Ahmed Djemal Pasha, the Governors of Aleppo, and Armenian Deportees in the Spring and Summer of 1915," *Journal of Genocide Research* 12 (2010): 173-218; Hilmar Kaiser, with Luther and Nancy Eskijian, *At the Crossroads of Der Zor: Death, Survival, and Humanitarian Resistance in Aleppo, 1915–1917* (Princeton, NJ: Gomidas Institute, 2001).

Zor District in the Early Stages of Deportations

The situation in the desert district of Zor was no better. In early May 1915, Governor Suad Bey, an Arab, learned that approximately 1,000 Armenian households were on their way to his district. The small town of Zor, along with the district's few and even smaller settlements, was unable to accommodate the incoming deportees. Consequently, the governor proposed purchasing tents from local Arab tribes to provide temporary shelter for the newcomers.⁹ Despite significant challenges, by 15 May 1915, Suad Bey had managed to secure housing for 250 families. He sought instructions on how to allocate arable land to the deportees and suggested concentrating the settlers in the central area of the district.¹⁰ Suad Bey also requested funds from the DH to provide farming implements, as the deportees' tools and equipment had been confiscated and redistributed to Muslim settlers in their former places of residence. Additional funds were needed for constructing schools and churches, though the churches were to remain without bells to align with Muslim sensitivities.¹¹

By 26 June 1915, 9,500 deportees had arrived in Zor. Of these, 4,000 were settled within the town and its surroundings, while another 3,000 had been relocated to other sub-districts. However, an additional 5,000 deportees were expected to arrive soon. As most of the district's land was desert, settlements were feasible only along the banks of the Euphrates and Khabur rivers, where arable land was scarce. Consequently, distributing land to all deportees was out of the question. Instead, the authorities began placing Armenians as laborers or sharecroppers with local landlords. Paid labor became the only reliable means for Armenians to obtain food, as the authorities distributed rations only sporadically, if at all. Meanwhile, conditions in the Rasulain sub-district to the north were deteriorating. The sub-district's governor warned that security forces from Diarbekir were attacking and looting deportees within the borders of Zor district. One gendarme reportedly incited the local population to massacre Christians. Additionally, tribal raids on railway construction sites had brought work to a standstill. In response, Suad Bey

⁹ DH.ŞFR 469-127, Suad to DH, Zor, May 5, 1915. See also: Hilmar Kaiser, "Zor District During the Initial Months of the Armenian Genocide," in *The First World War as a Caesura? Demographic Concepts, Population Policy, and Genocide in Late Ottoman, Russian and Habsburg Spheres*, ed. Christin Pschichholz (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2020), 109-124.

¹⁰ DH.ŞFR 471-17, [Suad] to DH, Zor, May 15, 1915.

¹¹ DH.ŞFR 472-65, Suad to DH, Zor, May 24, 1915; 472-83, [Suad] to DH, Zor, May 29, 1915.

mobilized a gendarmerie detachment and traveled to Rasulain and nearby areas to restore public safety and protect the construction sites.¹²

The Ten Percent Rule – An Exercise in Government Fiction.

On 5 July 1915, the Ministry of Interior introduced regulations for the settlement of Armenians, stipulating that their numbers should not exceed ten percent of the sedentary Muslim population in settlement areas. The authorities in Der Zor, however, could only remind the Ministry of Interior that the number of Armenian deportees already surpassed fifteen percent of the district's registered Muslim population. This figure excluded the large portion of the population that was nomadic or semi-nomadic, as the tribes often lived in temporary villages unsuitable for settling Armenians. In reality, the concentration of Armenians in permanent villages was even higher than the official numbers suggested. To comply with these directives, Kamil Bey, acting as governor in the absence of Suad Bey, began redirecting Armenians northward toward Rasulain. However, this measure proved no solution. Kamil Bey soon learned that an additional 2,000 Armenians were en route to Rasulain from Mardin in the north, making compliance with the regulations on population limits impossible. He warned that the authorities in Rasulain, already struggling with inadequate resources, would be overwhelmed.¹³ Some relief reached Rasulain when Djemal Pasha authorized a mission led by two Armenians—a priest and a pharmacist from Aleppo—to assist deportees in Rasulain and Zor. However, this initiative triggered an investigation by central authorities. The government sought to suppress such interventions, as it aimed to keep information about the deportations confidential, ensuring the outside world remained unaware of what was happening.¹⁴

By 27 July 1915, 14,770 Armenians had officially reached the district, contradicting earlier reports of 15,000 arrivals. Of these, 11,770 had come from the Marash district alone,

¹² DH.ŞFR 477-23, Suad to DH, Zor, June 25, 1915; 477-50, Kamil to DH, Zor, June 26, 1915; 477-112, Suad to DH, Zor, June 29, 1915; 477-113, Suad to DH, Zor, June 29, 1915; 478-62, Suad to DH, Zor, July 3, 1915; 54-354, Minister to Zor district, July 8, 1915. AA-PA Türkei 183/38, A 24658, "Bericht von Schwester Laura Möhring, die auf der Heimreise von Bagdad diese Vertriebenen in der Wüste traf", copy, enclosure in Schuchardt to AA, Frankfurt, Aug. 20, 1915.

¹³ DH.ŞFR 54-308, Ali Munif to Zor distr., July 5, 1915; 54-315, Ali Munif to Adana, Erzerum, Bitlis, Aleppo, Diarbekir, Syria, Trapizon, Kharberd, Mosul prov., Zor, Marash, Djanik, Cesarea, Ismid distr., Adana and Aleppo Abandoned Property Commissions, July 5, 1915; 479-22, Kamil to DH, Zor, July 7, 1915; 479-73, Kamil to DH, Zor, July 10, 1915.

¹⁴ DH.ŞFR 480-113, Kamil to DH, July 21, 1915; 54/A-71, Minister to Aleppo prov., July 22, 1915.

while only 3,000 originated from the Erzerum and Bitlis provinces. This was alarming news, as Zor was intended to be the principal destination for deportees from the eastern provinces. Once again, Kamil Bey emphasized that accommodating further arrivals was impossible. Thus far, the local authorities had managed to settle 7,500 Armenians, while another 7,843 were still waiting for placement.¹⁵ An urgent decision was required. Suad Bey departed for Aleppo by train from Rasulain, protecting the two Armenian relief workers who accompanied him. Upon reaching Aleppo, he and the new governor of Aleppo, Bekir Sami Bey, sent a joint telegram to the Ministry of Interior. They warned that 3,000 Armenian women and children were en route to Rasulain and Zor, and it was impossible to provide for them. The two governors proposed allowing these deportees to be sent to larger cities in Syria, where they might have a chance to find work.¹⁶

Suad Bey continued lobbying the Ministry of Interior for additional funding and took steps to address the deteriorating situation. He demanded that the governor of the Rasulain sub-district was removed and replaced with someone of his choosing.¹⁷ To underscore the gravity of the circumstances and strengthen his demands, Suad Bey even offered his resignation, though he remained at his post for the time being.¹⁸

By the end of August 1915, the number of Armenian deportees in the Zor district had risen to 20,000. Of these, 6,400 were sent further south along the Euphrates to the Ashara, Abukamal, and Ana sub-districts. In the central sub-district, 5,000 Armenians had been placed in villages, while 8,600 remained in Zor city, awaiting settlement locally. Suad Bey emphasized the urgent need for large-scale construction projects, estimating that 4,000 houses were required to prepare for the approaching winter when housing of deportees in tents would be impossible. Although most of the arrivals were women and children, there was still insufficient employment for the men who had managed to survive and reach Zor. The DH, however, denied requests for draught animals and seeds. Drawing on the relief work in Aleppo province, Suad Bey called for the formation of a local commission to organize relief and settlement efforts.¹⁹ Despite his persistent pleas, the number of deportees continued to rise.

¹⁵ DH.ŞFR 54/a-106, Minister to Aleppo, Syria prov., Urfa, Zor distr., July 25, 1915; 481-48, Kamil to DH, Zor, July 27, 1915.

¹⁶ DH.ŞFR 481-76, Bekir Sami, Suad to DH, Aleppo, July 28, 1915.

¹⁷ DH.ŞFR 483-60, Suad to DH, Rasulain, Aug. 10, 1915; 484-106, Suad to DH, Zor, Aug. 20, 1915.

¹⁸ DH.ŞFR 486-110, Suad to DH, Zor, Sept. 1, 1915.

¹⁹ DH.ŞFR 485-114, Suad to DH, Zor, Aug. 28, 1915; 488-103, Suad to DH, Zor, Sept. 1, 1915.

Ali Munif Bey, a former assistant to Talaat Bey at the Ministry of Interior, visited Aleppo to assess the situation. He estimated that approximately 150,000 Armenian deportees would arrive in Aleppo from the western provinces of the Ottoman Empire, with 50,000 expected to continue on to Zor, in addition to those already arriving from the eastern provinces.²⁰ By 7 November 1915, the Zor authorities had registered 26,543 Armenians. Of these, 12,454 were placed in villages, while 14,089 remained in Zor town. The desert road between Rasulain and Zor town remained a major deportation route, and these numbers included only those who survived the march. The death toll along the roads and in the towns and villages was not officially communicated.²¹ Only a few Armenians with the necessary funds and connections, or those aided by railway officials, managed to escape from Rasulain to Aleppo by rail.²²

Official data revealed that the influx of Armenian deportees led to a rapid expansion of settlements in the Zor district. The population of Sabka village, for example, increased from a few hundred to approximately 7,000. Armenian men deported from Zeitun were engaged in building new houses; 100 had been completed, with an additional 250 still under construction. However, due to the sheer number of deportees, the majority were forced to live in tents or other temporary shelters. Living conditions were dire, marked by widespread famine and rampant diseases, which claimed many lives. The situation in Zor town was equally grim. Its population had surged to 30,000, double its previous size. Like in Sabka, most deportees were confined to tents and endured severe famine conditions. Health care was scarce, if it existed at all, and up to 200 people were reportedly dying each day in Zor alone. Despite the high mortality rate, the number of those in need did not decrease, as new arrivals continually replaced those who had

²⁰ DH.ŞFR 488-80, Ali Munif to DH, Aleppo, Sept. 10, 1915.

²¹ On 1 September 1915, another 607 Armenians arrived from Mardin at Zor. A week later 43 deportees had come from Mardin and Viranshehir. On 12 September 222 Armenian women and children from Erzerum, Kharberd und Sebastia arrived. 22 Armenians came from Albistan and Goksun by the river route. DH.ŞFR 486-109, Suad to DH, Sept. 1, 1915; 488-26, Suad to DH, Zor, Sept. 8, 1915; 488-116, Suad to DH, Zor, Sept. 12, 1915; 496-57, Kamil to DH, Zor, Nov. 7, 1915.

²² Maritza Kedjedjian, Mamouret-ul-Aziz: Narrative of an Armenian Lady Deported from [Husseinig] (A Place Half-an Hour Distance from Kharberd)], Describing her Journey from [Husseinig] to Ras-ul-Ain; Written After Her Escape from Turkey, and Dated Alexandria, 2nd November, 1915; Published in the Armenian Journal "Gotchnag" of New York, 8th January, 1916, in James Bryce and Arnold Toynbee, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915-1916. Documents Presented to Viscount Grey of Fallodon by Viscount Bryce. Uncensored Edition* (Princeton, NJ: Gomidas Institute, 2000), 299-304.

died. The housing under construction could, at best, accommodate only a small fraction of the deportees.²³

Shukru Bey's Mission

The situation in Zor was far from unique. Authorities in Urfa, Aleppo, and the Syria province faced similar challenges. Additionally, Armenian deportee caravans clogged the roads to the settlement areas, creating chaotic conditions that also disrupted the transport of military supplies. In response, the Ministry of Interior dispatched Shukru Bey, the head of the Directorate for the Settlement of Tribes and Immigrants (*İskan-i Aşair ve Muhacirin Müdüriyeti*, hereafter IAMM), on an inspection tour to address the problems. Shukru Bey, the chief architect of the deportation program, issued two new manuals for the deportation of Armenians from the western Ottoman provinces to Aleppo, and a third one for their onward deportation to Zor. He also established a branch of the IAMM in Aleppo to streamline the deportation process in the region and exert a degree of supervision. Following his visit to Rasulain in the latter half of October, Shukru Bey praised the new Sub-District Governor Yusuf Zia Bey for his organizational skills in managing deportations there. Additionally, Shukru Bey locally recruited fifty Chechens to assist with deportation assignments in Aleppo province. Revising Ali Munif Bey's earlier estimates, he predicted that approximately 100,000 deportees would arrive from the west, with 20,000 expected to be accommodated in Zor district. One of Shukru Bey's main priorities was the removal of Armenians from Aleppo city, regardless of the consequences for other locations. To expedite this process, increased railway deportations were implemented, clearing Aleppo but simultaneously worsening the humanitarian crisis in Rasulain.²⁴

After touring most of the so-called "destination areas," Shukru Bey began coordinating deportations from Aleppo. On 10 November 1915, a conference was convened at Aleppo under the presidency of Fourth Army Commander Djemal Pasha. His army's jurisdiction covered all "destination areas" except those in Mosul province. The meeting included Mustafa Abdulhalik

²³ AA-PA, Türkei 183/41, A 5498, Litten to Rössler, Aleppo, Feb. 6, 1916 enclosure in Rössler to Bethmann Hollweg, Aleppo, Feb. 9, 1916; Kaiser, "Zor District," 121.

²⁴ DH.ŞFR 490-62, Shukru to DH, Aleppo, Sept. 22, 1915; DH.EUM 2 ŞB 13-9, Shukru to DH, Aleppo, Oct. 24, 1915; Hilmar Kaiser, "Shukru Bey and the Armenian Deportations in the Fall of 1915" in *Syria in World War I: Politics, Economy, and Society*, ed. Talha Çiçek (London: Routledge, 2016), 205, 207.

Bey, the new governor of Aleppo, as well as Ismail Djanbolad Bey, the head of the Ministry of Interior's Directorate for Public Security (*Emniyet-i Umumiye Müdüriyeti*, EUM), and Shukru Bey. The participants agreed to halt deportations from the western provinces for the duration of the coming winter, a policy change that could have provided significant relief to the Zor district. However, other decisions made at the conference shifted much of the deportation burden onto the district. The conference resolved to empty both the transit camps west of Aleppo and the city itself of deportees. Deportations to the southern Syria province were also terminated, and large-scale railway deportations to the east were planned. Deportees would be transported to Tell Abiad and Rasulain railway stations, from where they would march along the Euphrates and Khabur rivers toward Rakka, Sabka, and Zor, where they were ostensibly to be settled. Additionally, the agreement stipulated that Armenians who could not be settled in these locations were to be sent to Mosul. Given Suad Bey's reports about the dire conditions in Zor, this effectively meant routing deportees through the Zor district to Mosul, if feasible. However, this point was presumably left vague, as Mosul province had not been consulted, and logistical considerations were largely ignored. In practice, the number of deportees far exceeded the railway's capacity. Authorities responded by overcrowding railway cars beyond their official limits, resulting in horrific conditions and numerous deaths. Even with these measures, the railway could not accommodate the volume of deportees, forcing authorities to resort once again to marching Armenians through the desert. In summary, the conference concentrated the problems created by deportations in the Zor district, effectively making it the focal point for managing the overflow from the Syria and Aleppo provinces, as well as the Urfa district.²⁵

²⁵ The decision regarding railway transport appears to have been implemented immediately. Djemal Pasha dispatched an Armenian observer, J. Khéroyan, to Rasulain. Khéroyan was likely drafted into the Fourth Army, as he carried military credentials that legitimized his presence and activities in Rasulain. Neither the sub-district governor nor Suad Bey, who was also in Rasulain at the time, had been informed of his mission, and he was not under their authority. This suggests that Khéroyan was acting in a military capacity. It seems unlikely that Khéroyan was functioning as a deportation official under the command of the newly established IAMM branch office in Aleppo, as he was unable to intervene in the inhumane railway deportations managed by the IAMM. However, Khéroyan also carried a document issued by the IAMM branch office, likely intended to introduce him to local officials involved in the deportations.

Kaiser, "Shukru Bey," 201; AA-PA, *Türkei* 183/41, A 5498, Rössler to Bethmann Hollweg, Aleppo, Feb.9, 1916; J. Khéroyan, "La situation des Arméniens déportés à Ras ul-Aïn et leur extermination," *Revue d'histoire arménienne contemporaine* 2 (1998): 110-111; Garabèd K. Mouradian, "Ras ul-Aïn," *Ibid.*, 119-120.

Nothing Changes

In Zor district, towns and villages were crowded with approximately 40,000 deportees. New arrivals had to be relocated to tents in smaller settlements, which lacked any administrative infrastructure. To address this, Suad Bey planned to deploy mounted gendarmes on inspection tours to establish minimal administrative oversight in these areas. Many deportees were sick, and those who were healthy were unable to farm due to the unavailability of draught animals and arable land. Even if farming was possible, the deportees would require at least six months' worth of supplies to sustain them until their first harvest. Men were a small minority among the deportees. Many of the male arrivals had perished without being registered. Around 80% of the population consisted of women and children, who were entirely dependent on government aid. Many women, overwhelmed by despair, reportedly wished for death. The limited aid distributions were further marred by corruption. The only realistic option for improving the situation was to permanently settle the deportees at their current locations. In other words, Suad Bey advocated for an end to deportations to Zor. Once again, he urged the central authorities to allocate substantial funds for relief. How unrealistic the request was, could not have escaped any informed observer.²⁶

To bolster his proposal and demonstrate his willingness to cooperate and follow orders, Suad Bey emphasized that without additional funds for transport animals and food, it would be impossible to move Armenians from Rasulain to Zor. He stressed the urgency of the operation, as worsening weather conditions were accelerating the spread of diseases, posing a significant threat to the military supply route passing through Rasulain. Suad Bey's report was based on personal observations, having just returned to Zor from Rasulain. Along the road, he witnessed firsthand the desperate conditions prevailing in the desert. By the end of December 1915, approximately 21,500 Armenian deportees were camped at Rasulain. Their relocation to Zor remained the district authorities' most pressing task, even as Zor itself was severely overcrowded and bracing for the arrival of additional deportees from Aleppo via the route along the Euphrates River.²⁷

²⁶ DH.ŞFR 498-31, Suad to DH, Rasulain, Nov. 20, 1915; 498-47 Suad to DH, Rasulain, Nov. 21, 1915.

²⁷ Suad Bey planned to allocate the funds to purchasing bread and to assign one camel for every ten children, with additional camels designated for transporting the sick. DH.ŞFR 501-77, Suad to DH, Rasulain, Dec. 15, 1915; 502-

In the town of Zor, the situation had deteriorated further. Acting Governor Kamil Bey was unable to provide adequately for the deportees. Despite the government's settlement program stipulating the need for education for Armenian children, nothing had been done in this regard. Due to a lack of funds, the authorities resorted to borrowing money from the local municipality and other sources to finance the pending deportation of 15,000 Armenians to Mosul. With all funds exhausted, officials remained unpaid.²⁸

Moreover, grain stocks in Zor were critically low, with supplies sufficient for only one and a half months. To prevent speculation, the authorities fixed the price of wheat. However, whatever positive impact this measure might have had was negated by central authorities. Despite the grain shortage, the central government prohibited the sale of government-owned grain, reserving it exclusively for military use. Additionally, any surplus grain was to be transferred to the army. In essence, Constantinople directed the Zor authorities to exacerbate the famine by removing supplies from the market. Clearly, the plight of the starving population was of no concern to the Ottoman government. On the contrary, it sought to extract as much grain as possible from the disaster-stricken area.

Equally concerning was the lack of seeds for planting, as out of desperation people had consumed their stored seed grain. Consequently, most farmers were unable to plant, leading to both famine and a significant decrease in government revenue. The local authorities applied for additional government funds of at least 10,000 Turkish Pounds (£T) and requested seed deliveries through the Ministry of Agriculture. The central government, for the time being, promised to provide the necessary funds.²⁹ By January 1916, a drought had set in, compounding the already dire situation. Outlying districts reported increasing difficulties, and securing deliveries from neighboring provinces became nearly impossible. In Aleppo province, the influx of Armenian deportees had led to severe shortages and high inflation, mirroring the conditions in Zor. Supplies from Mosul province were inaccessible due to attacks along the overland routes by Yezidis in the Sindjar area and other groups. The famine fueled rising insecurity in the Zor district. Armenians deported from Aleppo's Meskene district to Zor were subjected to attacks.

73, Suad to DH, Rasulain, Dec. 25, 1915; 503-2, Defterdar Galip to DH, Aleppo, Dec. 27, 1915; 503-31, Suad to DH, Rasulain, Dec. 29, 1915.

²⁸ DH.ŞFR 503-39, Kamil to DH, Zor, Dec. 29, 1915; 503-50, Kamil to DH, Zor, Dec. 31, 1916.

²⁹ DH.ŞFR 501-108, Kamil to DH, Zor, Dec. 18, 1915; 59-79, Minister to Zor district, Dec. 21, 1915; 502-11, Kamil to DH, Dec. 20, 1915; 502-53, Kamil to DH, Zor, Dec. 23, 1915.

Unable to take significant action, Suad Bey appealed for directives to be sent to Aleppo and Mosul provinces to secure the roads leading to the Zor district.³⁰

Deportations to Mosul

The pleas from Zor prompted the DH to make some adjustments to its deportation program that kept in line with the decisions of the November conference. Resources were severely limited, and the simplest solution remained the same: moving Armenians from one place to another. Consequently, Talaat Bey ordered the deportation of all Armenians from Rasulain to Mosul. According to Suad Bey, Rasulain's local Armenian population comprised only five or six households of shopkeepers, but more than 30,000 Armenian deportees were present in the sub-district. Precise figures were difficult to ascertain due to the absence of detailed records from sub-district authorities. Approximately 6,000 deportees were concentrated in the village of Rasulain, while an estimated 15,000 Armenians were deemed capable of being deported to Mosul within a relatively short time. However, the remaining deportees were too weak or ill to undertake the journey.

Suad Bey was unable to improve the situation, having already exhausted all available government funds allocated for deportees and his budget for bribing local tribal leaders. For the time being, the authorities focused on preparing the deportation of primarily Armenian men to Mosul. The route along the railway track from Rasulain to Nissibin and then on to Zakho was reserved for military transport and therefore off limits for deportations. As a result, the deportees were forced to use an alternate route, requiring them to carry all necessary provisions, as there were no settlements along the way. However, such supplies were unavailable due to the lack of funds. Despite these obstacles, on 8 January 1916, Suad Bey reported that 3,000 Armenians had been dispatched to Mosul. He noted that if even a portion of the requested funds were transferred, orderly deportations could continue.³¹

Between 19 and 25 January 1916, the authorities deported 4,000 individuals, but this failed to improve local conditions, as 6,980 new deportees arrived during the same period. In the

³⁰ By the end of February 1916, it had become official that aside from a quantity of animal fat Zor district would be unable to export other agricultural produce. DH.ŞFR 511-24, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 27, 1916; 511-37, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 28, 1916.

³¹ DH.ŞFR 59-189, Talaat to Suad (at Rasulain), Jan. 3, 1916; 504-32, Suad to DH, Zor, Jan. 5, 1916; 667-31, Suad to DH, Rasulain, Jan. 8, 1916; 505-104, Suad to DH, Zor, Jan. 18/19, 1916; 508-72, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 8, 1916.

following weeks, Zor district registered 5,440 additional arrivals. Subsequently, the arrival rate slowed, with 1,862 Armenians arriving by 19 March 1916. However, it surged again when 3,707 deportees arrived within four days, up to 25 March 1916. Meanwhile, deportations from Rasulain continued, with 7,000 Armenian deportees sent to Mosul within a month, and 600 placed in nearby locations. These figures did not account for Armenians who had died along the route or those still en route to the district capital. In sum, the deportations from Rasulain to Mosul did little to alleviate the worsening conditions in Zor district; the overall number of deportees continued to rise rather than decline. All Suad Bey could do was repeatedly urge the DH to halt further deportations to his district. He also demanded renewed orders to improve security along the deportation routes. Conditions in Mosul province remained dire.³²

Suad Bey's Personal Approach

Desperate for funds, Suad Bey sought permission to accept a 50 £T donation from the German consulate in Aleppo for relief efforts.³³ However, this sum was negligible given the scale of the crisis, as more and more Armenian deportees continued to arrive from Aleppo. Starvation was widespread and relentless.³⁴ Many children had lost their parents and relatives. In Zor, the authorities gathered 340 orphans and placed them in an inn. However, it was evident that this represented only a fraction of the actual number of orphaned children. Despite the dire situation, Suad Bey optimistically claimed he could care for all the orphans he might find, subtly emphasizing the need for additional funding. The number of orphans quickly increased to over 500. Some financial assistance came from the local population and Armenian deportees, leading to the establishment of a makeshift orphanage. This facility also served as a distribution center for relief efforts. As usual, funding was insufficient, and government aid was desperately needed.³⁵ Some government officials had taken Armenian orphan girls with the intention of

³² DH.EUM 2 Şb 69-5, Suad to DH, Zor, Jan. 31, 1916; DH.ŞFR 506-56, Suad to DH, Zor, Jan. 22, 1916; 506-102, Suad to DH, Zor, Jan. 25, 1916; 508-55, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 7, 1916; 508-36, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 8, 1915; 508-55, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 7, 1916; 509-3, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 11, 1916; 509-19, Suad to DH, Feb. 12, 1915; 510-117, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 25, 1916; 511-24, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 27, 1916; 511-38, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 28, 1916; 512-69, Suad to DH, Zor, Mar. 9, 1916; 513-96, Suad to DH, Zor, Mar. 19, 1916; 514-66, Suad to DH, Zor, Mar. 25, 1916.

³³ DH.ŞFR 508-72, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 8, 1916.

³⁴ DH.ŞFR 506-33, Suad to DH, Zor, Jan. 21, 1916.

³⁵ DH.ŞFR 508-73, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 8, 1916; 510-97, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 24, 1916. For Ottoman government policies concerning orphans, see: Hilmar Kaiser, "Assimilating Armenians, 1915-1917," in

taking them to Constantinople and other places. Suad Bey justified these actions by claiming they were intended to provide the girls with education, attempting to preempt any suspicions that the officials' motives might have been less than charitable. The DH allowed the relocation of the girls, provided they were not taken to Constantinople, where a sizable Armenian community still existed.³⁶

Setting aside the challenges of securing funding, he proposed establishing a women's teacher college and employing women in carpetmaking as a means of providing livelihood opportunities. Additionally, six Armenian women and children, who had no remaining relatives, sought shelter with him and applied for conversion to Islam. In response, he suggested creating a specialized institution for such cases, where they could receive food allowances and other essential support.³⁷ Such projects were clearly unfeasible, as the district was completely out of funds. By the end of March 1916, the central government had not transferred any new funding for deportees or for the district's general administration for the new fiscal year, which had begun at the start of the month. Local tax revenues were insufficient to sustain even basic administrative functions. Meanwhile, Armenian deportees continued to arrive in large numbers. In response to the reports, Talaat Bey allocated a small amount of money and pressed for the immediate onward deportation of Armenians to Mosul. The DH reiterated to the governor that it considered the presence of a large number of deportees in Zor district to be extraordinarily harmful.³⁸

Despite the central government's overt hostility towards Armenians, Suad Bey's official reports displayed a noticeable degree of compassion for the deportees. However, these reports did not fully capture the governor's true attitudes. In reality, he was even more proactive in attempting to improve local conditions. For instance, in Rasulain, the authorities permitted more affluent Armenians to establish a new residential quarter in the village. This construction initiative provided employment for Armenians, similar to the building of a hospital and some barracks. The Armenians named the new quarter "Suadiye" in honor of the governor. It was situated at a distance from the sprawling tent camp where the majority of deportees endured

Aufarbeitung historischer Verbrechen gegen die Menschlichkeit: Eine interdisziplinäre Auseinandersetzung mit dem Armenier-Genozid, ed. Melanie Altanian (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2018), 23-55.

³⁶ DH.ŞFR 509-48, Suad to DH, Feb. 13, 1916; Talaat to Zor distr., Feb. 16, 1916.

³⁷ DH.ŞFR 513-95, Suad to DH, Zor, Mar. 19, 1916.

³⁸ DH.ŞFR 513-97, Suad to DH, Zor, Mar. 19, 1916; 514-71, Suad to DH, Zor, Mar. 16, 1916; 515-8, Suad to DH, Zor, Mar. 28, 1916; 515-82, Suad to DH, Zor, Apr. 2, 1916; 62-192, Talaat to Zor distr., Apr. 1, 1916; 62-199, Minister to Zor distr., Apr. 1, 1916; 62-273, Talaat to Zor distr., Apr. 9, 1916.

famine and rampant contagious diseases. In and around Rasulain, hundreds of deportees died each day from “natural” causes, while frequent rapes and murders claimed additional lives.³⁹

At times, Suad Bey took decisive and severe measures to protect Armenians, going far beyond official protocol. For some time, Bedouins had been raiding Armenian caravans and tents, plundering and killing deportees during the attacks. When Armenians appealed to the governor for help, he dispatched gendarmes to capture the perpetrators. After their apprehension, Suad Bey convened a public interrogation, after which he sentenced the men to death. He even invited Armenian victims to carry out the executions. When they declined, the gendarmes beheaded the offenders, placed their heads on spears, and paraded them through Rasulain as a warning to others. Suad Bey’s drastic actions also left a strong impression on the gendarmes and irregulars tasked with overseeing the deportees on their marches from Rasulain to Zor. The guards were terrified of returning to Zor if Armenians had escaped from their caravans, fearing that Suad Bey might accuse them of murdering the fugitives and execute them. These very public displays of authority and his protective stance toward Armenians earned Suad Bey the nickname “Armenian Patriarch.”⁴⁰

At Zor, Armenians experienced considerable freedom of movement and assembly while Suad Bey was in charge. Wealthy Armenian merchants, priests, and a doctor regularly gathered at a public reading room.⁴¹ The governor himself frequently entertained and visited local Christian notables. Having lived in Egypt, Suad Bey was familiar with foreign languages and maintained friendly relations with Europeans and Americans in Aleppo.⁴² His social circle also included newly arrived prominent Armenians, some of whom he had encountered on the road between Rasulain and Zor or at Sabka. One of them, the physician Dr. Hovhannes Markarian from Albistan, Suad Bey appointed as a medical inspector for the Armenian deportees in and around the town. The governor also tasked Markarian with distributing relief. The two men became rather friendly. Markarian learned that Suad Bey had been a supporter or member of the

³⁹ Shukru Aghazarian, “Odyssey of an Armenian Youth Who Learned He Could Tackle the Turk with Bribery,” in *The Cilician Armenian Ordeal*, ed. Paren Kazanjian (Boston, MA: Hye Intentions Inc., 1989), 5-6; Khéroyan, “La situation,” 112; Mouradian, “Ras ul-Aïn,” 119-120.

⁴⁰ Aghazarian, “Odyssey,” 6; Khéroyan, “La situation,” 111-112.

⁴¹ AA-PA, Türkei 183/41, A 5498, Litten to Rössler, Aleppo, Feb. 6, 1916 enclosure in Rössler to Bethmann Hollweg, Aleppo, Feb. 9, 1916.

⁴² United States, National Archives, Record Group (US-NA, RG) 59, 867.4016/373, Jackson to Secretary of State, Washington, March 4, 1918. Hilmar Kaiser, “Resisting Genocide: The Aleppo Relief Network 1915-1918” in *The Rescue of Armenians in the Middle East in 1915-1923*, ed. Harutyun Marutyan, Narine Margaryan (Yerevan: Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, 2020), 270, 277-278.

oppositional “Hürriyet ve İtilaf Fırkası” (Freedom and Accord Party) which had been forced to go underground.⁴³ Another confidant was Hagop Nersessian, a former dragoman of the British consulate in Baghdad. In 1912, Nersessian had become the chairperson of the newly founded chapter of the “Armenian General Benevolent Union,” an organization closely associated with the conservative Armenian Ramgavar Party. Beyond his official and public roles, Nersessian was a highly educated linguist. At Zor, he became a confidant of Suad Bey and exerted some influence on the governor, ultimately aiding the Armenian deportees.⁴⁴

Another prominent member of this circle was George Sukkar, a Melkite Christian merchant and landowner. Likely the wealthiest man in the district, Sukkar used his considerable resources to aid Armenian deportees, providing desperately needed food and clothing. His extended family owned several large compounds in the town, including one near the government house. After work, Suad Bey frequently visited Sukkar at his residence, often joined by Nersessian and other members of the community. Sukkar’s house, built in a European style and equipped with indoor plumbing—an almost unheard-of luxury in Zor at the time—became a central gathering place. Over time, the Sukkar family’s compounds were turned into shelters for deportees. Sukkar’s wife alone housed 34 deportees in one of their homes. This humanitarian effort came at great personal risk, as hosting large numbers of displaced individuals increased the likelihood of exposure to contagious diseases. In early 1916, Sukkar contracted typhus during his relief work among the deportees and passed away. Many of the deportees sheltered in the family’s compounds succumbed to the same disease.⁴⁵

The Sukkar family operated a branch office in Rasulain, managed by George Sukkar’s brother, Bashar Bey, who maintained excellent relations with local officials. Leveraging these connections, Bashar Bey was able to protect several wealthy Armenians from Erzerum province, including the Levonian family, by providing them with papers for safe travel to Zor. While most

⁴³ Mihran Aghazarian, “Mémoires d'un déporté [à Deir-Zor],” *Revue d'histoire arménienne contemporaine* 2 (1998): 222. At least one other official also extended his trust to Makarian and revealed to him his opposition to massacre as well as providing highly compromising information. Ibid., 181. Robert Tatoyan, “The Armed Resistance Attempt of Deported Zeitun-Armenians in the Deir al-Zor Desert,” (forthcoming). I am indebted to Dr. Tatoyan for his kind permission to refer to his upcoming article.

⁴⁴ Aghazarian, “Mémoires,” 221. US-NA, RG 84, Baghdad, 711.5.N., Heizer to Percy Cox, Bagdad, Mar. 15; Raymond H. Kévorkian, Vahé Tachjian, *The Armenian General Benevolent Union. One Hundred Years of History*, vol. 2, 1941-2006 (Cairo: Armenian General Benevolent Union, 2006), 71.

⁴⁵ Esther Der-Hagopian, “Georges Soukkiar, bienfaiteur des déportés de Deir-Zor,” *Revue d'histoire arménienne contemporaine* 2 (1998): 174; Aghazarian, “Mémoires,” 220; Shoah Foundation, Visual History Archive, Hovannisian Oral History Collection (VHA), Takouhi Levonian; Armenian Film Foundation, Naim Sukkar.

deportees were forced to remain outside the city, the Levonians were granted permission to enter Zor and stay at Bashar Bey's house, located next to George Sukkar's residence. The Sukkar family's extensive network of connections and business interests spanned the entire district, proving invaluable when a promising business opportunity arose near Rasulain.⁴⁶

Government Projects at Rasulain

Between July and December 1915, Suad Bey spent a significant portion of his time in Rasulain. The ongoing conflict with raiding security forces from Diarbekir province and the crisis caused by the deportations provided sufficient justification for his stay. Additionally, the location allowed for short visits to Aleppo, as the railway line provided faster and more comfortable travel compared to the road along the Euphrates River. During his time in Rasulain, Suad Bey focused on overseeing various building projects. In December 1915, he declared that employing Armenian labor for construction projects was making sensible use of funds. Under his direction, a military hospital and facilities for army supply units were constructed in Rasulain. He also established a gendarmerie post to protect the road to Mardin. One project he prioritized was the construction of a bridge near Rasulain, although its funding was still pending. Suad Bey proposed reallocating funds from two planned bridges in the nearby Arada area to secure resources for the new project. The Arada project, initiated three months earlier, had been abandoned due to a lack of funds, with little hope of resuming in the near future. Interestingly, while the governor claimed a shortage of workers for the Arada bridges, he noted that sufficient labor had been recruited for the Rasulain bridge. He emphasized that the new bridge would facilitate the deportation of Armenians from Rasulain to Zor.⁴⁷

The Baghdad Railway and the Land Regime in the Arada Steppe

Despite the chaos reigning in the region, Suad Bey found an opportunity to combine his official duties with personal business interests. His tour of the area coincided with a mission undertaken

⁴⁶ VHA, Takouhi Levonian.

⁴⁷ DH.ŞFR 501-29, Suad to DH, Rasulain, Dec. 12, 1915; 502-29, Suad to DH, Rasulain, Dec. 22, 1915; 505-41, Suad to DH, Zor, Rasulain, Jan. 12, 1916. Mikayel Keshishian, "Testimony" in *The Armenian Genocide: Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors* ed. Verjiné Svazlian (Yerevan: Gitoutyoun, 2011), 422.

by one of his associates in Zor, Mahmud Bey, a member of the district's administrative council. This coincidence was likely not accidental, as Mahmud Bey's assignment was controversial among locals. Given the Chechens' reputation for taking matters into their own hands, the presence of a sizable gendarmerie force accompanying the mission likely seemed prudent. The construction of the Baghdad Railway Line in Der Zor's northern sub-district brought significant changes to the region.⁴⁸ The sub-district's seat of government had been relocated to the once-small village of Rasulain, where a new railway station was established. The railway opened the area to commerce, creating new opportunities. To the west, Aleppo and its expansive market became easily accessible. Locals also anticipated that the railway would soon provide a similarly convenient connection to Baghdad, driving expectations of rising land prices. However, disputes over land titles complicated matters. Many local land titles were contested, and the land registry refused to issue new ones, as the government intended to expropriate landowners along the railway line. Mahmud Bey was tasked with leading a commission to manage this particularly contentious issue.⁴⁹

The land regime in the area was highly complex. During the agricultural crisis of the 1880s and 1890s, many of the original landowners abandoned farming. Compounding the issue, the region became a conflict zone where Chechen settlers and nomadic tribes—both Bedouin and Kurdish—competed for control.⁵⁰ While surveying land east of Rasulain, Mahmud Bey learned from members of the Sharabi tribe that an area called Arada had no legally recognized owner. Locals distinguished the area into two zones: Greater and Lesser Arada. In late December 1873 or early January 1874, members of the Sharabi tribe had secured land titles for the entire Arada. However, in the 1880s, they abandoned the land but still retained their legal documents. By

⁴⁸ On the Baghdad Railway during the Armenian Genocide, see Hilmar Kaiser, "The Baghdad Railway and the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1916. A Case Study in German Resistance and Complicity," in *Remembrance and Denial. The Case of the Armenian Genocide*, ed. Richard Hovannisian (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 67-112.

⁴⁹ Cumhuriyet Arşivi (CA), Toprak ve İskan Genel Müdürlüğü (TIGM), Muhacirin, 36-11-9, Suleiman Agha to Ministry of War, Jan. 7, 1916.

⁵⁰ On Kurdish tribes in the area, see Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Sheikh and State. The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London: Zed Books, 1992), 187-189; Hütteroth documented the migrant of Kurdish nomads in the area, albeit in their curtailed form following World War I. See Wolf-Dieter Hütteroth, *Bergnomaden und Yaylabauern im mittleren kurdischen Taurus* (Marburg: Selbstverlag des Geographischen Institutes der Universität Marburg, 1959), map 1.

around 1900, Chechens began claiming land in Lesser Arada and established a village there—a development that appeared to be of little concern to Mahmud Bey.⁵¹

A Business Venture

Mahmud Bey located Sharabi tribesmen who identified themselves as the legal owners of the land and were willing to sell it. In May or early June 1915, he successfully acquired 1,500 hectares along the Baghdad Railway line, between kilometers 1009 and 1019. The land was valued at approximately 60,000 £T, or 40 £T per hectare. However, no reliable record of the amount paid existed in the local land registry office, and people thought that the amount paid was only a fraction of the land's actual value. Registering the purchase and obtaining proper title deeds proved to be a more complicated process. Mahmud Bey employed persuasive measures—described by some as threats—to convince the local land registry official to bypass the ban on issuing new title deeds. Initially, only 104 hectares were officially recorded, allegedly purchased for 123 £T, or about 1.2 £T per hectare.⁵² This valuation represented an extraordinary bargain, which also served to minimize taxes and fees. In August or early September 1915, Mahmud Bey transferred portions of the land to his associates in Zor. Once again, the land registry official disregarded regulations, certifying the transfers and issuing new title deeds. The new owners included Hamdi Bey, the former chief accountant of Zor district; George Sukkar, the prominent local merchant; and Hadjer Hanim, the wife of Governor Suad Bey, who acted as a proxy for her husband. Suad Bey later confirmed that the land had become part of his estate.⁵³

The new owners had ambitious plans for Arada. With assistance from a member of Zor's administrative council, they secured draught animals, demonstrating that neither Mahmud Bey nor Suad Bey saw any conflict of interest in using their official positions to obtain scarce resources for their private business venture. Their plans included cultivating potatoes and corn as cash crops. George Sukkar served as an intermediary in recruiting Armenian deportees as

⁵¹ DH. İdâre-i Umûmiye-i Dahiliye Mûdiriyyeti (IUM).EK 80-4, Zor Chief Account to Ministry of Finance (ML), Zor, Mar. 26, 1916 (copy) enclosure in ML to DH, May 2, 1916, Public Land Directorate, 2nd Dep., Gen. 632, Spec. 44; DH.Memurin (MEM) 486-5, HTMU to Talaat, Apr. 5, 1917.

⁵² DH.IUM.EK 80-4, Zor Chief Account to ML, Zor, Mar. 26, 1916 (copy) enclosure in ML to DH, May 2, 1916, Public Land Directorate, 2nd Dep., Gen. 632, Spec. 44; DH.ŞFR 525-102, Zeki to Ministry of Interior, Zor, July 18, 1916, No. 98.

⁵³ DH.IUM.EK 80-4, Zor Chief Account to ML, Zor, Mar. 26, 1916 (copy) enclosure in ML to DH, May 2, 1916, Public Land Directorate, 2nd Dep., Gen. 632, Spec. 44; DH.ŞFR 506-111, Suad to DH, Zor, Jan. 25, 1916; DH.MEM 486-5, HTMU to Talaat, Apr. 5, 1917.

farmhands. At the time, it was common practice among prominent landowners in the Rasulain area to exploit Armenian deportees as a source of cheap labor. Typically, deportees were compensated with minimal food rations which were barely sufficient for survival. Despite the harsh conditions, this work offered a degree of temporary protection for the laborers. With draught animals secured, Suad Bey and his associates were left with only one critical need: an adequate supply of seeds. The governor considered using funds from the district's special budget to purchase seeds and expressed hope that the Ministry of Agriculture might provide additional supplies.⁵⁴

The Chechen's Response: Suleiman Bey's Petition

The land deal did not go unchallenged. Suleiman Agha, the leader of the Chechens in Lesser Arada, fiercely opposed the arrangement. He claimed that in the past he had made repeated attempts to obtain land titles for Lesser Arada, only to be denied, with officials citing the ban on issuing new titles in the railway zone. His renewed appeals to authorities in Zor were similarly ignored—unsurprising, given Suad Bey's personal investment in the very land Suleiman Agha claimed. During the governor's visits to Rasulain, Suleiman Agha directly confronted Suad Bey, demanding recognition as the rightful owner of the Lesser Arada area. The confrontation was anything but cordial. Suleiman Agha later alleged that the governor had threatened him, advising him to remain silent or risk being killed. Tensions escalated further when gendarmes visited Suleiman Agha's village and confiscated 640 kilos of tobacco, claiming it was contraband. As if this were not enough, Suad Bey established a gendarmerie post in the village, officially for the protection of the road to Mardin. The move was perceived as a direct assertion of control over the Chechens.⁵⁵

Suleiman Agha refused to concede defeat. Realizing that his efforts in Zor district were futile, he traveled in January 1916 to neighboring Mardin and Diarbekir. The acting governor of Diarbekir was none other than Bedri Bey, formerly the governor of Mardin. Suleiman Agha could count on Bedri Bey's support, as Suad Bey had previously denounced Bedri Bey and

⁵⁴ DH.ŞFR 506-111, Suad to DH, Zor, Jan. 25, 1916; Mouradian, "Ras ul-A'in," 119-120.

⁵⁵ Tobacco was a government monopoly and administered by the "Régie co-intéressée des tabacs de l'Empire ottoman." See: Donald Quataert, *Social Disintegration and Popular Resistance in the Ottoman Empire, 1881-1908: Reactions to European Economic Penetration* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1983), 13-40.

called for his punishment for murder. On January 7, 1916, Suleiman Agha filed a petition with the Ministry of War and the Ministry of Finance, which was in charge of land matters.⁵⁶ In it, he presented himself as a survivor of massacres in the Caucasus who had fled to the Ottoman Empire in the 1890s. He emphasized that the government itself had ordered him to settle in Rasulain. Additionally, he highlighted his service as a lieutenant in the gendarmerie and explained that upon retiring, he had settled east of Rasulain in Zerkani Nahiye, within the boundaries of Lesser Arada. Contrary to the evidence of the land registry which showed that the land had been registered to the Sharabi tribe by 1874, Suleiman Agha claimed that the land in question had been abandoned for 50 years. He maintained that he and his companions had sought out the former owners and concluded a valid agreement to purchase the land. He argued that this transaction gave him the rightful claim to the land titles.

Suleiman Agha further stated that thirty Chechen households, comprising 150 people, had settled on the land around 1899 and established a new village with residential houses and farm buildings for each family. The settlers had restored irrigation channels from a river located about 1.5 hours away and had ploughed the land using fifty oxen. Additionally, they had planted 15,000 trees, including 7,000 poplar trees, 5,000 willow trees, and 3,000 fruit trees. Over the course of sixteen years, they claimed to have spent 1,500 £T on building materials, irrigation, and agricultural improvements.

Suleiman Agha emphasized that he had complied with the authorities' refusal to issue him official land titles, yet he had continued to pay land taxes despite being denied title deeds. Over the years, he claimed to have paid more than 40 £T in tithes, in addition to the more recent war taxes. His compliance, however, was not rewarded. Instead, he alleged that Mahmud Bey and his associates had unlawfully seized the land. In his denunciation of Mahmud Bey's actions, Suleiman Agha accused George Sukkar of being not just an Armenian, but a "most harmful Armenian leader." According to him, Sukkar was an Armenian revolutionary and a dangerous enemy of the state. Furthermore, he claimed that Governor Suad Bey was an ally of Sukkar, actively working against the Chechens. Suleiman Agha asserted that the governor had violently displaced the Chechens and replaced them with Armenians who were followers of Sukkar. Local officials, he argued, dared not interfere due to fear of Suad Bey and his alleged Armenian

⁵⁶ CA, TIGM, Muhacirin, 36-11-9, Suleiman Agha to Ministry of War, Jan. 7, 1916. He mailed the petition first on 10 January 1916 from Mardin and a second time on 21 January 1916 from Diarbekir. Suleiman Agha to DH, Mardin, Feb. 8, 1916

accomplices. Suleiman Agha also accused Suad Bey of robbing the Chechens by seizing their tobacco crop, which should have fallen under the jurisdiction of the Tobacco Régie officials in Mardin. Frustrated that his appeals for justice had been ignored in Zor district, Suleiman Agha turned to Diarbekir province for help. He called for the formation of a commission composed of officials or provincial council members from Diarbekir or Mardin to investigate and resolve the situation.⁵⁷

At Diarbekir, Suleiman Agha managed to meet with Mazhar Bey, the head of a special inquiry commission touring parts of the eastern provinces. However, since Zor district was not within Mazhar Bey's zone of investigation, the meeting yielded no practical results. Bedri Bey proved to be more supportive. He filed his own report on the issue, reiterating Suleiman Agha's claims and requesting instructions aligned with the latter's demands. The land dispute, it seemed, presented Bedri Bey with an opportunity to intervene in the affairs of Zor district, which appeared to be desirable. After all, Suad Bey was his enemy. Suleiman Agha escalated his campaign by sending additional telegraphic appeals to the Ministry of War, the Grand Vizierate, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Interior, ensuring that his grievances were not forgotten and heard at the highest levels of government.⁵⁸

Suad Bey's Response

The Ministry of War took up Suleiman Agha's case and referred the matter to the Ministry of Interior. The Ministry of Finance, for its part, contacted the authorities at Zor on 6 February 1916 forwarding a copy of Sulaiman Agha's petition and ordering an investigation.⁵⁹ The next day, the Ministry of Interior invited Suad Bey to submit a statement regarding the case. Four days later, Suad Bey cabled a detailed report. In his reply, Suad Bey confirmed that Suleiman Agha had been petitioning him for the past six months. He pointedly remarked on Suleiman Agha's rise to wealth despite serving as a lowly paid second lieutenant in the gendarmerie, implying that his

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ CA,TIGM, Muhacirin, 36-11-9, Bedreddin to DH, Diarbekir, Jan. 26, 1916; Suleiman Agha to Ministry of War, Diarbekir, Feb. 8, 1916; Suleiman Agha to Grand Vizirate, Diarbekir, Feb. 8, 1916; Suleiman Agha to ML, Diarbekir, Feb. 8, 1916; Suleiman Agha to DH, Diarbekir, Feb. 8, 1916. The former telegrams were passed on to the DH.

⁵⁹ ML.Emlak-ı Emiriye Müdüriyeti (EEM) 1191-43, ML to Zor District Accounting Office, Feb. 6, 1916; Zor Chief Account to ML, Zor, Mar. 26, 1916; DH.IUM.EK 80-4, ML to DH, May 2, 1916, Public Land Directorate, 2nd Dep., Gen. 632, Spec. 44; CA,TIGM, Muhacirin, 36-11-9, Ministry of War to Ministry of Interior, Jan. 27, 1916.

fortune was likely ill-gotten. According to Suad Bey, Suleiman Agha had given the tribesmen—the true landowners—a small sum of money before establishing a hideout for Chechen bandits on the disputed land. He highlighted the recent seizure of approximately 640 kilos of contraband tobacco, further discrediting Suleiman Agha's claims. Despite lacking a title deed, Suleiman Agha continued attempting to occupy the land. Suad Bey argued that the newly established gendarmerie post disrupted the operations of the Chechen bandits, who reportedly numbered around 200 households in the Rasulain area. He described Suleiman Agha as an “old thief” seeking to restore the previous, lawless state of affairs through his petitions.

Addressing the Armenian dimension of the case, Suad Bey pointed out that it was permissible to settle Armenians outside the 25-kilometer exclusion zone from the nearest railway line. He emphasized that many Armenians could be resettled at a distance of 35 kilometers from Rasulain, where they could grow crops such as corn and grain and provide valuable labor.⁶⁰ Considering the dire conditions of Armenian deportees in Rasulain, Suad Bey likely believed that this settlement scheme would garner interest from the Ministry of Interior.

Suad Bey further noted that Suleiman Agha's applications to district and sub-district authorities had been rejected as meritless by both the land registry and local officials. He added that further details were being examined as part of an ongoing investigation. Finally, Suad Bey requested prompt instructions to forward Suleiman Agha's petitions and telegrams to a court martial, aiming to put an end to the Chechen leader's intrigues and improve conditions in the sub-district.⁶¹

Suad Bey's response did not settle the matter. On February 14, 1916, Talaat Bey informed Minister of War Enver Bey that he had received a reply from Suad Bey. Due to the significance of the issue, the Interior Ministry's HTMU would conduct an investigation. On the same day, IAMB Director Shukru Bey wrote to Hamid Bey, the director of the HTMU, providing an update on the current state of the affair and formally requesting an investigation. On February 24, 1916, Shukru Bey followed up with Hamid Bey, informing the latter of Bedri Bey's intervention and reiterating the urgency of an official investigation.⁶²

⁶⁰ CA,TIGM, Muhacirin, 36-11-9, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 11, 1916.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² CA,TIGM, Muhacirin, 36-11-9, Talaat to Enver, Feb. 14, 1916; Shukru to Hamid, Feb. 24, 1916.

Bureaucracy at Work

Meanwhile, the authorities at Zor worked on their official response to the Ministry of Finance's inquiry. On 26 March 1916, the district's chief account submitted a short statement. It established the Sharabi tribe's initial ownership of the land, the date of the land transfer to Mahmud Bey and that of Mahmud Bey's sale to his associates. The document also specified that Suleiman Agha had no claim whatsoever to the land. For its part, the Ministry of Finance forwarded the reply and its copy of Suleiman Agha's petition to the DH for further consideration on 2 May 1916.⁶³ In response, DH forwarded the petition to Zor district and ordered a thorough review of the facts.⁶⁴ At Zor, the instructions set off flurries of activity. The matter reached the Land Registry at Zor on 20 May 1916 and it took the officials only three days to file their reply. Two days later, the acting governor sent off the documents to Constantinople.⁶⁵

The Zor Land Registry reiterated the legal status of the land, namely that Mahmud Bey and his associates had legally purchased the land. As for Suleiman Agha's claims the officials confirmed that the latter had filed on 8 October 1915 a petition, stating that he had bought the land and been the owner for the past 15 years. However, already on 24 April 1909 the district's Administrative Council had rejected his claims following an investigation. Given the circumstances, the land registry refused to annul the newly issued land titles. It was up to Suleiman Agha to contest in court those land titles and establish his claim to land. Moreover, on 5 September 1915, the land registry had issued a decision to the same effect in the case of another claimant to the land. Interestingly, the land registry did not address the question of the land expropriations in the railway zone and the ban on the issue of new land titles. These findings did, however, not bring about a termination of the investigation.⁶⁶

The pending investigation marked a significant victory for Suleiman Agha. He had successfully mobilized not only the upper echelons of the Diarbekir provincial administration but also the highest levels of the central government. At the same time, it was obvious that no immediate resolution was forthcoming. The investigation would require time, as Zor was part of

⁶³ DH.IUM.EK 80-4, Zor Chief Account to ML, Zor, Mar. 26, 1916 (copy) enclosure in ML to DH, May 2, 1916, Public Land Directorate, 2nd Dep., Gen. 632, Spec. 44.

⁶⁴ DH.IUM.EK 80-4, DH to Zor District, May 6, 1916, IUM Gen. 6422, Spec. 29.

⁶⁵ DH.IUM.EK 80-4, Zor Land Registry to Zor District, May 23, 1916 enclosure in Zor District to DH, May 25, 1916, No. 55.

⁶⁶ DH.IUM.EK 80-4, Zor Land Registry to Zor District, May 23, 1916 enclosure in Zor District to DH, May 25, 1916, No. 55.

an HTMU district encompassing both Mosul province and Zor district. It would be a while before an inspector could reach Rasulain and Zor to investigate the matter. Simultaneously, the land dispute had escalated beyond the realm of local negotiations and informal arrangements, which had previously been the norm.

At Constantinople, Talaat Bey most likely found the situation uncomfortable. The governor of an independent district was under investigation, and there was little he could do to further clarify the situation. The incoming correspondence from district had not rendered any decisive new information. It took another two months before an opportunity arose to gain more insight into the matter. By July 1916, a new governor had taken office in Zor and was establishing firm control over the district's administration. Zeki Bey, the new appointee, was already infamous for torturing Armenians prior to his transfer. Unlike his predecessor, Suad Bey, Zeki Bey was unlikely to form alliances with local Christians. His appointment was deliberate—he was selected because he was expected to execute orders without question, regardless of their nature. When Talaat Bey inquired about the land dispute, Zeki Bey initially reported only what was already known: Suad Bey had privately purchased the land in his wife's name. Talaat Bey was dissatisfied with this vague response and demanded more detailed information, such as the exact size of the land, its actual value, and the amount paid for it. It was only through Zeki Bey's new response that the Ministry of Interior discovered the area in question was far larger than the portion mentioned in Suleiman Agha's petition.⁶⁷

Zeki Bey was far from finished. Two days after submitting his report on the land dispute, the new governor forwarded fresh accusations against Suad Bey. He alleged that the former governor had accepted substantial bribes from Armenians during the deportations and the local population census, thereby undermining government policy. Suad Bey was also accused of embezzling government funds allocated for expenses related to the deportations. According to Zeki Bey, about 2,000 of the roughly 20,000 Armenians in Zor city had escaped registration, while an additional 1,000 remained unrecorded in surrounding settlements. Census officials had reportedly demanded bribes of 5 £T per person to process registrations. Some Armenians were registered solely based on their own statements, allowing them to conceal their true identities. Others had even obtained Ottoman identity papers without proper verification. Zeki Bey

⁶⁷ The DH had announced Zeki Bey's appointment as district governor of Zor on 30 April 1916. DH.MEM 486-5, DH to Zor distr., Apr. 30, 1916; DH.ŞFR 65-128, Talaat to Zor distr., July 1, 1916; 524-92, Zeki to Talaat, Zor, July 3, 1916; 65-175, Talaat to Zor distr., July 10, 1916; 525-102, Zeki to DH, Zor, July 18, 1916.

implicated several of Suad Bey's associates in these alleged crimes, including high-ranking officials such as Fuad Bey, the head of the correspondence department, and Abdulkirim Bey, a former official responsible for deportation affairs. As a result of Zeki Bey's investigation, Fuad Bey resigned, and others, including Mahmud Bey—Suad Bey's business partner and a member of the administrative council—were removed from their posts. Zeki Bey planned to ban these men from the district to set an example. However, Talaat Bey intervened, advising Zeki Bey that exiling the men was illegal. Instead, Talaat Bey instructed that proper legal proceedings should be followed to address the accusations.⁶⁸

The Investigation Report

It took nine months until, in April 1917, Emin Bey, the Ministry of Interior's investigator, submitted his report on the Arada land dispute. The investigator carefully distinguished between the issues related to land purchases in Lesser Arada and Greater Arada. Suleiman Agha's case specifically concerned the Lesser Arada. Emin Bey determined that the land in Lesser Arada had been left vacant by the Sharabi tribe for about twenty years before Suleiman Agha took over. This contradicted the latter's claims that the land had been abandoned for fifty years. While Suleiman Agha's assertion was false, the investigator confirmed allegations regarding the land acquisition by Mahmud Bey and his associates. Emin Bey found that Mahmud Bey had indeed coerced local officials and the local Council of Elders into certifying the land transaction, an act that necessitated legal prosecution of Mahmud Bey and the implicated local officials. Through local interrogations, Emin Bey also uncovered that the transfer certificates, along with all private contracts, waivers, and declarations, were fraudulent. His informants had consistently lied, and the local land registry proved useless for clarifying ownership, as it contained no evidence of legal transfers. Ultimately, Emin Bey was unable to establish the rightful owner of the land. He recommended an independent investigation by the Office of the Land Registry in Constantinople to scrutinize the operations of its Rasulain branch and review local land titles and waivers. In

⁶⁸ CA,TIGM, Memurin, 28-4-6, Zeki to DH, Zor, July 20, 1916; Talaat to Zeki, July 25, 1916; DH.SN.Tahrirat Kalemi 69-46, Zeki to DH, Zor, July 20, 1916.

conclusion, Emin Bey not only questioned the legality of Mahmud Bey's land acquisition and that of his associates but also cast doubt on Suleiman Agha's claim to the land.⁶⁹

The situation regarding the Greater Arada was no clearer than that of the Lesser Arada. This land had also originally been owned by the Sharabi tribe. Over time, land transfers had taken place, but these were processed by the land registry official not in his office but in the tents of the tribesmen. This irregular practice had created opportunities for corruption and abuse.

The exact circumstances surrounding these transfers remained disputed. Allegations of extortion were raised, with some supposed sellers claiming they had not consented to the transactions. Faced with these competing claims, Emin Bey declared that he could not determine the veracity of the statements or the rightful ownership of the land. Instead, he recommended that claimants present their cases in court, which would need to settle the matter. As in the case of the Lesser Arada, the local land registry's files were in disarray. It was not clear whether the land had been vacant at all. One fact was certain, however: given the state of the files, the local land registry official should have refrained from issuing land titles to Mahmud Bey. Once again, Emin Bey called for a central investigation into the operations of the Rasulain branch of the land office to clarify the situation. Only after such an investigation could legal action be pursued by interested parties.

Politically significant was the fact that Emin Bey issued a clean bill of health for Suad Bey, absolving the governor of any wrongdoing. According to Emin Bey, Suad Bey was free of guilt, as he had not been involved in the original land deal. The governor had merely purchased land for his wife from Mahmud Bey after the latter had obtained the title deeds. Furthermore, contrary to Suleiman Agha's claims, the governor did not even own land in Arada. Applying the same reasoning, Hamdi Bey and the late George Sukkar were also declared innocent of any misconduct. Emin Bey appeared uninterested in investigating the precise circumstances of the land transfers. Regarding Suleiman Agha's complaint, Emin Bey absolved himself of further inquiries by concluding that the petitioner lacked any legal title to the land. Thus, the case was officially closed. Emin Bey concluded his investigation without implicating any Ministry of Interior personnel. Legal trouble was anticipated only for a minor official associated with the Ministry of Finance and a member of Zor district's administrative council, neither of whom were on the Ministry of Interior's payroll. For his part, Talaat Bey contacted the

⁶⁹ DH.MEM 486-5, HTMU to Talaat, Apr. 5, 1917

Ministry of Finance to involve the Land Registry Administration in addressing the matter. While Suleiman Agha had succeeded in obstructing the land acquisition by Suad Bey and his associates, he had simultaneously failed to solidify his own claim. Worse still, his claims were now fully invalidated. Nevertheless, the overall outcome was not entirely unfavorable for Suleiman Agha. Acting preemptively before the investigation's findings were finalized, he and his Chechen allies created new realities on the ground. Within weeks of the Ministry of Interior's call for an investigation, the Chechens had resolved one of their most pressing concerns and gained additional profit in the process—they killed the Armenian settlers on the disputed land.⁷⁰

The Massacre

In his report, Emin Bey made no mention of the settlement of Armenian deportees in Arada, as though it had never occurred. This omission was striking, given that Suleiman Agha had explicitly warned the authorities about a so-called “harmful Armenian leader” and his followers taking over the land. Ignoring such a claim should have raised concerns, especially in light of the Ministry of Interior's typical zeal in pursuing Armenian political leaders. Talaat Bey, in his correspondence with Zeki Bey regarding Arada, also showed no interest in the Armenians involved, despite the Ministry of Interior's broader efforts to suppress Armenians. Once again, it seemed the issue had simply faded into obscurity. By this time, the Armenian deportees and farmhands in the Rasulain area were no longer a significant concern. This shift in focus coincided with critical changes in the administration of Rasulain. In March 1916, Suad Bey's ally, the Rasulain governor Yusuf Ziya Bey, was transferred to a new post in Rumkale, Aleppo province. Armenian deportees had praised Yusuf Ziya Bey as a fair and compassionate governor who had assisted them. He was replaced by Kerim Refi Bey, a fanatical member of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) and a vehement opponent of Armenians.⁷¹

Even more significant was the transfer of Zor district from the control of the Ottoman Fourth Army to that of the Ottoman Sixth Army.⁷² This change in jurisdiction had critical

⁷⁰ DH.MEM 486-5, Talaat to ML, Apr. 9, 1917

⁷¹ Yusuf Ziya Bey's transfer was not a form punishment. He was the preferred candidate for the post of Aleppo governor Mustafa Abdulhalik Bey. DH.ŞFR 508-28, Mustafa Abdulhalik to DH, Aleppo, Feb. 6, 1916; Khéroyan, “La situation,” 112.

⁷² Edward Erickson, *Ordered to Die: A History of the Ottoman Army in the First World War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 128.

implications. Under martial law, military decisions overrode those of civilian authorities based on claims of military necessity. From the outset of the deportations, Fourth Army Commander Ahmed Djemal Pasha had pursued his own policy regarding Armenian deportees, using his authority to exempt them from wholesale massacre. The transfer of Zor district to the Sixth Army Region marked a turning point, leaving the deportees vulnerable to new policies and actions under the Sixth Army's command.⁷³

Initially, Kerim Refi Bey conducted a survey of the Armenian camp, openly displaying his resentment and swearing at the deportees. On 30 March 1916, he personally selected Armenians for deportation to Mosul and dispatched the first convoy from Rasulain. In principle, his actions appeared to align with the decisions made at the Aleppo conference in November 1915. The deportees, unsuspecting of what awaited them, offered no resistance. Shortly thereafter, the guards accompanying the convoy returned, carrying the deportees' clothing. The following day, Armenian women gathering grass at a distance from the camp witnessed security forces butchering Armenians in a nearby valley. In this manner, the large camp at Rasulain was emptied consecutively. Each day, 300 to 500 Armenians were marched off, only to be murdered by killing squads about ten kilometers away on the banks of the Djirdjib River, which marked the western boundary of Lesser Arada.⁷⁴

A police officer in a nearby village temporarily protected an extended Armenian family by employing them in house construction. Similarly, some Armenians survived for a time by working as builders, but once construction ended, the authorities took them away. Ultimately, only a few children survived, hidden with Chechen families and disguised as Muslims. Some officials at Rasulain warned the Armenians that deportation meant certain death and advised them to remain in the camp as long as possible. Others suggested converting to Islam as a temporary reprieve. Many Armenians heeded this advice, changed their names, and were allowed to stay for the time being. However, this reprieve was short-lived. About a month later, even the Armenian converts were ordered to march to Zor town, fully aware that this would lead to their massacre.⁷⁵

⁷³ Hilmar Kaiser, "Regional Resistance," 365-383.

⁷⁴ Kévorkian, *Le génocide*, 804-805.

⁷⁵ Aghazarian, "Odyssey," 7-8; Hovsep Bshikian, "Testimony" in Svazlian, *Armenian Genocide*, 433-439; Khéroyan, "La situation," 112-114.

In sum, the authorities systematically emptied Rasulain village, its local camp, and surrounding villages and farms of Armenians, murdering approximately 12,000 of the at least 14,000 Armenian deportees in the vicinity during late March and April 1916. The remaining 2,000 Armenians were mostly sick or otherwise incapacitated individuals who had been left behind, as well as a few comparatively wealthy Armenians living in the Suadiye neighborhood. These remnants, along with newly arrived deportees, were killed by the Chechens in late May. At the same time, Armenian farmhands and construction workers, whose services were no longer needed, were also massacred. The killings were carried out by members of the local Chechen community, with nearly all males between the ages of ten and sixty participating in the slaughter. Muslim observers commented on the extraordinary savagery of the Chechen perpetrators. When confronted by an Ottoman officer about these crimes, Kerim Refi Bey declared that he was acting under orders. Meanwhile, the military had sent a pioneer battalion from the Fourth Army to the area to repair two damaged bridges that Suad Bey had been unable to fix earlier. Some of the Armenians temporarily spared from the massacres had been conscripted to work on the bridges for two weeks. After completing their work, they too were massacred. The soldiers sent to the area witnessed the mutilated corpses of the Armenians and confirmed that the massacres had been systematically organized.⁷⁶

Suad Bey's Departure – Baghdad

Suad Bey's tenure in Zor was nearing its end. At the time, the central government was finalizing his transfer to a new post and deliberating on his replacement. On 30 April 1916, the Ministry of

⁷⁶ Khéroyan estimated that approximately 40,000 deportees had been present at Rasulain, while Aram Andonian provided a somewhat lower estimate of over 30,000 Armenians. By early February 1916, relief workers in Aleppo informed the local U.S. consulate that the number of deportees at Rasulain was about 20,000. The grim characterization of the Chechen community in Rasulain is supported by Ottoman data. In August 1915, there were 401 Chechen males, including boys, living in Rasulain. Of these, Shukru Bey had recruited 50 for service in Aleppo province, leaving fewer than 300 teenage boys and able-bodied Chechen men in the area. Escorting victims to massacre sites, carrying out the killings, returning to Rasulain, and disposing of plunder was time-consuming but also highly profitable. Given these circumstances, it seems likely that participation in the killings was widespread among the Chechen community. Nevertheless, there were notable exceptions. A small number of Chechens defied the norm, choosing to protect Armenians and helping some to escape. DH.SN.M 238-78, Rasulain, Aug. 25, 1915; AA-PA, Türkei 183/42, A 12911, Rössler to Bethmann Hollweg, Aleppo, Apr. 27, 1916; 183/43, A 17939, Rössler to Bethmann Hollweg, Aleppo, June 17, 1916; US-NA, RG 59, 867.4016/271, Jackson to Morgenthau, Aleppo, Feb. 8, 1916. Khéroyan, "La situation," 112-114; Aram Andonian, "Les massacres de Ras ul-Aïn," *Revue d'histoire arménienne contemporaine* 2 (1998): 107-110; Onnig K. Bédrossian, "De Tokat à Ras ul-Aïn," *Ibid.*: 115-117; Zaréh E. Ghougassian, "Scènes de la vie des déportés de Ras ul-Aïn," *Ibid.*: 117-118; Garabéd K. Mouradian, "Ras ul-Aïn," *Ibid.*: 119-120.

Interior informed Baghdad province that Suad Bey had been appointed deputy governor of the province. Suad Bey departed Zor on 1 May 1916, and assumed his new position on 27 May 1916. The transfer was not a reprimand; in fact, it was a promotion. Khalil Bey, commander of the Ottoman Sixth Army and in charge of the Mesopotamian front, officially held the title of governor of Baghdad. This dual role gave him both civilian and military authority, although his military responsibilities left him with limited time to manage civilian affairs. Instead, Khalil Bey played a supervisory role, retaining the final authority on decisions while delegating the daily administration to the acting governor—now Suad Bey.⁷⁷

Suad Bey understood that his Armenian acquaintances in Zor were in grave danger. Using his influence, he arranged for the transfer of Nersessian and other associates to Baghdad. He also secured permits for several Armenian girls, including Takhouhi Levonian, to travel to Baghdad. Nersessian employed Levonian's sister in his household, while Takhouhi preferred to stay with Apostolic Armenians rather than with Nersessian, who was Catholic. Suad Bey offered Nersessian an administrative position, and the German consul also sought to hire him due to his fluency in German and excellent local connections. However, Nersessian declined both offers and instead chose to work with the American consulate, where he distributed relief funds. Thanks to Suad Bey's protection, Nersessian was able to re-establish himself in Baghdad and assume a prominent role in the city. Nonetheless, his position remained more precarious than he might have hoped.⁷⁸

On 8 January 1917, Suad Bey informed the Ministry of Interior, in response to an inquiry, that only one Armenian had worked for a consulate of an allied or neutral power in Baghdad. According to his report, the individual had resigned following the death of the German consul. It had taken approximately six weeks for the Ministry of Interior's memorandum to reach Baghdad, and probably the same time for Suad Bey's reply to reach Constantinople. On 10 February 1917, Talaat Bey sent a telegram demanding a response to the Ministry of Interior's inquiry. Provincial authorities replied promptly by telegram, capitalizing on the fact that Suad Bey had already left Baghdad for a new post on 2 February 1917. Their report contradicted the former deputy governor's earlier statements. Contrary to Suad Bey's claim, Hasro Kapudjujan,

⁷⁷ DH.MEM 486-5, DH to Baghdad prov., Apr. 30, 1916; Personnel Dept. to Accounting Dept., June 7, 1916; Aug. 6, 1916

⁷⁸ VHA, Takouhi Levonian; Aghazarian, "Mémoires," 224; National Archives of India, Government of India, 1920, Foreign and Political Department, Establishment A: Proceedings, Oct. 1920, Nos. 10-14, Brevet to Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign and Political Department, Baghdad, Dec. 11, 1919 (copy).

the interpreter for the German consulate, had not resigned. Worse, the authorities deemed him a “treacherous Armenian.” Additionally, they emphasized that Nersessian, whom they described as “a particularly disrespectful and treacherous individual,” had been brought from Zor to Baghdad. The authorities sought instructions on how to deal with the two men.⁷⁹

In response, Talaat Bey demanded details on when, for what purpose, and under whose authority Nersessian had been brought to Baghdad. On 25 February 1917, the acting governor, Memduh Bey—the notorious former governor of Erznka district—replied that Nersessian had returned to Baghdad on 3 June 1916, under the orders of Suad Bey. Memduh claimed the case was resolved, as Nersessian had been deported a week earlier. This was false.⁸⁰

The day after Suad Bey’s departure from Baghdad, the police had attempted to arrest Nersessian but failed, as he had gone into hiding. When local Armenian clergy were arrested, Nersessian surrendered to the authorities. U.S. Consul Oscar Heizer learned of Nersessian’s arrest and subsequent disappearance while in police custody. On 5 March 1917, Heizer confronted Memduh Bey about the case and demanded Nersessian’s release. Memduh responded with a blatant lie, claiming that Nersessian had been sent to Kut El Amara to serve as an interpreter for Sixth Army Commander Khalil Pasha. According to Memduh, the British had intercepted the steamer carrying Nersessian, meaning he was likely in British custody. This response demonstrated Memduh Bey’s disdain for Heizer.⁸¹

In Baghdad, it was common knowledge that being “sent south to see Khalil Pasha at Kut” was a euphemism for being murdered and having one’s body thrown into the river. In reality, Nersessian had been tortured and beaten to death at Baghdad’s main police station on 23 February 1917, upon receipt of Talaat Bey’s telegram. This brutal act eliminated an unwanted witness just days before the British captured the city.⁸²

⁷⁹ DH.EUM 5 ŞB 34-3, Suad Bey to DH, Baghdad, Jan. 8, 1917; Ahmed to DH, Baghdad, Feb. 14, 1917; DH.ŞFR 72-203, Talaat to Baghdad prov., Feb. 10, 1917;

⁸⁰ DH.EUM 5 ŞB 34-3, Talaat to Memduh, Feb. 20, 1917; Memduh to DH, Baghdad, Feb. 25, 1917.

⁸¹ US-NA, RG 84, Baghdad, 711.5.N., Heizer to Percy Cox, Bagdad, Mar. 15; Zaven Der Yeghiayan, *My Patriarchal Memoirs* (Barrington, RI: Mayreni Publishing, 2002), 141-142;

⁸² National Archives of India, Government of India, 1920, Foreign and Political Department, Establishment A: Proceedings, Oct. 1920, Nos. 10-14, Arousiak Nersessian to Wilson, Baghdad, Nov. 25, 1919 (copy); Brevet to Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign and Political Department, Baghdad, Dec. 11, 1919 (copy); Edmund Candler, *The Long Road to Baghdad*, vol. 2 (Boston-New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1919), 121.

Conclusion

At the outset of the Armenian deportations, the Ottoman government designated the Zor district as the primary destination for deportees from the empire's eastern provinces. By November 1915, Zor had also become the main destination for Armenian deportees from the western provinces. However, the desert district lacked infrastructure and had few habitable locations. The Ministry of Interior's repeated orders for the deportation of more than a 100,000 Armenians to Zor at a time the Armenians at Zor already outnumbered the official limit for deportees in the district made it evident that the Ottoman government disregarded its own directive that Armenians should not exceed ten percent of the settled Muslim population in the settlement region. Instead the government invoked the rule selectively, depending on convenience. Similarly, assimilation programs targeting Armenian children were largely absent in the Zor district. The region lacked foreign-owned institutions that could be confiscated and converted into government orphanages. Like their parents, the children were considered expendable, valued only for their statistical significance. The central government's response to any undesirable concentrations of Armenians was to enforce constant movement from one location to another. This approach not only denied local authorities the resources necessary to manage the humanitarian crisis but also ensured that Armenians died en route due to starvation, disease, exhaustion, and exposure.

By refusing to address the emergency, the government systematically transferred the burden from one place to another, creating large concentrations of Armenians without providing means for their survival. This policy led to catastrophic mortality rates among the deportees. In effect, the central authorities replaced direct massacres—used predominantly in the Ottoman Third Army's region—with famine and epidemics in greater Syria.

In Zor, the promise of transferring Armenians to the Mosul province proved to be mere rhetoric. Once the eastern provinces were emptied of Armenians, the Ottoman government prepared the administrative groundwork for mass murder. By removing the control of the Ottoman Fourth Army and appointing a compliant sub-district governor, the government facilitated the initiation of large-scale massacres in the Zor district.

The killings marked a stark departure from Suad Bey's policies. As governor, Suad Bey adhered to the official government policy, which allegedly aimed at resettling Armenian

deportees in new locations. He actively protected the deportees from killing squads sent from the Diarbekir province, which had collaborators stationed in Rasulain. Among these collaborators were some gendarmes, local Arabs, and a majority of the Chechen community, who were eager to exploit the deportations and attack the deportees for personal gain. While some of Suad Bey's initiatives, such as his settlement program, were partially funded by the government, the financial support was grossly insufficient. As a result, most infrastructure projects—whether directly or indirectly connected to resettling Armenians—were financed through unpaid or nominally paid labor by deportees themselves. Since few men from the eastern regions survived the journey, the labor pool primarily consisted of deportees from the western provinces who had not passed through the killing fields of the Third Army Region.

Suad Bey combined relief efforts with personal interests. Alongside his associates, he acquired a large area of land. Lacking sufficient personal funds, it is plausible that he resorted to a combination of embezzlement and extortion. Allegations suggest that he siphoned off government funds allocated for deportees and even defrauded some deportees, according to the testimony of at least one survivor.⁸³ Additional funding came from his local associates, most notably George Sukkar. Regardless of whether these actions skirted the boundaries of legality or constituted outright crimes, they had a positive impact on a significant number of Armenian deportees. Through this scheme, many deportees were able to leave the Rasulain camp, where they had suffered from crimes, starvation, and disease. Resettling on farmland provided access to food and, critically, potable water—a decisive improvement in their living conditions. This not only benefitted the individuals directly involved but also alleviated the dire conditions at the overcrowded Rasulain camp. Furthermore, the initiative had the potential to boost local food production at a time of critical need.

The investors opened up an area for the settlement of deportees that would otherwise have been inaccessible due to Chechen opposition. Chechen leader Suleiman Agha had long been a local strongman in the Rasulain area. Rising from a low-ranking gendarmerie officer to a wealthy landowner, his claims to the land were dubious at best. However, his ability to enforce his will made the legality of his ownership irrelevant—until the railway construction boom triggered a sharp increase in land prices. Suad Bey and his associates were able to overcome the Chechens' resistance. The investors from Zor had sufficient firepower and, at least temporarily,

⁸³ Agilian, “Who was the former governor of Der Zor Ali Suat?” *Joghovourti Dzayn* (10 May 1919).

the law on their side. Suleiman Agha found himself in a precarious position. He could not resort to heavy-handed tactics against local administrators because he needed the land registry official alive to secure a title deed. Moreover, he failed to intimidate Suad Bey, who openly expressed his readiness to use deadly force against the Chechens. The severed heads of Arab perpetrators only enhanced the governor's fearsome reputation.

To further assert his authority, Suad Bey inflicted serious financial damage on the Chechens by seizing their tobacco stock. He also established a gendarmerie post—the only one during his tenure—in the Chechen village itself, placing them under constant surveillance. Available sources do not corroborate Suleiman Agha's claim that the Chechens were displaced. The presence of the gendarmerie post in their village suggests they remained in the area. The Chechens despised Armenians, and the plundering, raping, and killing of deportees had become a way of life in and around Rasulain. The settlement of Armenians on what the Chechens considered their land was seen as a provocation. Furthermore, if the settlement proved successful, it threatened to permanently undermine Chechen dominance in the region.

Suleiman Agha did not give up. He leveraged his allies within the administration of Diarbekir province, where officials shared his anti-Armenian views. His petition is a rare document in which a Chechen perpetrator shared his own views and agenda. By demanding that a commission composed of Diarbekir officials be sent to Rasulain, he played a calculated move, knowing they would support his agenda. His petitions to various central government departments also proved effective. In these, he framed Suad Bey's policies as a threat to the government by referencing so-called "harmful Armenians." To Suleiman Agha, the fact that George Sukkar was not Armenian was irrelevant. His collaboration with Armenian deportees rendered him an "Armenian" in the Chechens' eyes. Both Melkites and Armenians were viewed as *giaours*—unbelievers. The case's referral to the HTMU delayed any swift resolution, but Suleiman Agha and his men found a quicker way to address their problem.

The appointment of Kerim Refi Bey created an opportunity for Suleiman Agha to act decisively. The new administrator orchestrated the massacre of Armenians in the Arada area. The slaughter went undetected, as the Chechens' local interests aligned with those of the central government. The authorities had neither registered nor counted the Armenian settlers in Arada, effectively erasing their existence. By April 1916, the only evidence of the Armenians' presence in the area was their decaying corpses.

In Zor, a provincial bourgeoisie had emerged, comprising individuals from diverse ethnic, religious, and social backgrounds. This elite included high-ranking officials, local Arabs, and Christians from Melkite, Catholic, and Armenian Apostolic communities. Despite their different backgrounds, they shared a common language, Arabic, which facilitated communication and cooperation. Members of this group welcomed and integrated Armenian deportees who shared a similar educational, economic, or cultural background into their social circles, offering them protection and support. Ideologically, this group transcended the propaganda and policies of the Ottoman government. Unlike the state's portrayal of Armenians as enemies or the Chechen perception of them as disposable victims ripe for exploitation of any sort, the provincial elite viewed Armenian deportees through a more complex lens. Their perspective temporarily frustrated the Ottoman government's resolve to annihilate as many Armenians as possible.

Using their limited resources, the local elite sought to alleviate the overwhelming misery faced by the deportees, effectively opposing the central government's genocidal policies. While this was undeniably a humanitarian effort, it may also have reflected an investment in the future of their networks and business relations. In cases like Arada, the boundary between exploitation and genuine aid might have been blurred, reflecting the complex dynamics of survival and self-interest under such dire circumstances.

Rendering assistance to survivors from bourgeois Armenian families highlights a neglected theme in the study of the Armenian Genocide: the role of class in determining survival. In some instances, authorities specifically targeted wealthy Armenians for "special processing," which often involved plundering and murder based on pre-determined hit lists, rather than the wholesale slaughter inflicted on large caravans. However, outside these targeted cases, wealthy Armenians had significantly better chances of survival. Their advantages were manifold. Wealthier Armenians spoke Turkish and had experience in dealing with Ottoman officials, which could help them navigate life-threatening situations. They also possessed greater resources, such as access to means of transport, food, and medicine, which increased their chances of survival during deportations. Upon reaching urban centers in or near the so-called destination areas, such as Aleppo and Zor, they could reconnect with their networks and secure assistance. A thorough study of class dynamics during the Armenian Genocide remains a pressing need for future research.

It is evident that class played a pivotal role—not only in survival but also in resisting CUP nationalism. The remarkable solidarity and resilience exhibited by the Zor elite suggests that class relations were at least in part shaping postwar and post-genocide society in the Arab provinces. This society, united in its rejection of CUP nationalism and its genocidal legacy, may have drawn strength from these networks of mutual aid and shared experiences.

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