

ARMENIANS AND KURDS: A COMPLEX AND STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP

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By [Tigran Yegavian](#), [EVN Report](#), 16 January 2023

Different religions and socio-economic developments are among the historical factors hindering an Armenian-Kurdish rapprochement. Kurds were dependent on Armenian peasants and craftsmen during Ottoman rule in addition to Armenian creditors, contributing to antagonism toward Armenians. Suffering under the same Ottoman and Safavid yoke on the territories of present-day Turkey and Iran can contribute to a rapprochement of Armenians and Kurds. In the profoundly unequal society where the Christian [raya](#) was often subject to Kurds, the institution of “kirvelik” -- a sort of sponsorship which placed a Kurdish child under the protection of an Armenian thus binding the two families for life — was a way of forging organic ties between the two communities belonging to different religions. It was an essential element for Armenian-Kurdish co-existence.

A key moment in Armenian-Kurdish relations occurred during the reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid II, who charged Kurdish feudal lords with establishing their domination over Armenian villages. Kurdish oppression peaked with the participation of the Kurdish Hamidiye regiments in the pre-genocidal massacres of Armenians in 1894-1896.

A 2015 publication by Kurdish anthropologist Adnan Celik and Turkish historian Namik Kemal on the collective memory of the Armenian Genocide among the Kurds had a strong impact on the scientific community. Using oral history, the authors were able to establish several observations. Firstly, everyone knew about the extermination of the Armenians in detail. The second observation is that since 1915 Kurds have suffered under the successor state of the Ottoman Empire -- the Turkish state. The regret and remorse of the descendants of the Kurds who took part in the atrocities against Armenians is palpable in the research text. The fact that ordinary people in Kurdish communities helped commit mass crimes or, at the very least, let it happen is an impediment to Kurdish-Armenian relations. With the notable exception of the Yazidis and the Kurdophone Alevis of Dersim who protected the Armenians at the risk of their lives, many Kurds did not hesitate to kill their Armenian neighbor while testimonies attesting to an attitude of “righteous among the nations” among Alevi Kurds of Dersim are [rare](#).

While acknowledging that their ancestors facilitated the genocide of

Armenians, contemporary Kurds **feel** "amputated" by the "departure" of the Armenians. "As if a part of our heart, our body, our brain and our intelligence was gone" is a feeling shared by many Kurds. If the Armenian question, despite the efforts of civil society and progressive parties, remains largely taboo in Turkish society, among the Kurds that taboo has been broken. Moreover, those Kurds who have an interest in perpetrating genocide denial are descendants of the profiteers of the genocide, and continue to directly benefit from the genocide. They thus have an interest in perpetuating state denial and defending the Turkish state's foundational crime. This explains, to some degree, the parallel established in the collective imagination of the Kurds between militias in charge of carrying out the genocide (the *bejiks*) and the "village protectors" (the *korucu*), established at the end of the 20th century to counter the guerrillas of the PKK: the same terror methods, the same violence against Armenians but also against the rebellious Kurds.

The Need to Cooperate

At the dawn of the 20th century, Kurdish Emir Abdul Rahman Bedir Khan met representatives of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaktsutiyn in Geneva to organize a common approach. The representative of the Ottoman Kurdish nation at the Versailles Peace Conference Sharif Pasha conferred with Boghos Nubar Pasha, leader of the Armenian national delegation. Armenians and Kurds agreed on the establishment of a Kurdish state backed by the Armenian state on the rubble of the Ottoman Empire. This forms the basis of Turkish nationalist fear, traumatized by the provisions of the Treaty of Sèvres signed in August 1920, which provided for the complete dismemberment of Turkish Anatolia. In the minds of the leaders of Turkey any Armenian-Kurdish rapprochement was tantamount to an existential threat. It was therefore necessary to revive Islamic solidarity to prevent the establishment of the project. In 1927, however, not a decade after the genocide, Kurds and Armenians found common ground in Beirut through the establishment of the Khoyboun committee led by Bedri Khan and Hihsan Nuri Pasha. The ARF-Dashnaktsutyun pledged to contribute financially to the Ararat Rebellion, an uprising of Kurds against the Turkish government in 1930 in the Ararat (Agri) province. Ironically, the committee included elements who were extremely hostile towards Armenians and even perpetrators of crimes against humanity. Strategy trumped feelings.

While a whole generation of oppressed Kurds in Turkey heard their mother tongue resounding for the first time through Radio Yerevan, Kurdish fighters who would go on to found the PKK in 1978 rubbed shoulders with Armenian comrades from ASALA in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley training camps. It was a brotherhood of arms driven by the same strategic objectives: a common anti-imperialist narrative, and even blood ties, taking into account the number of Kurdish fighters with Armenian ancestry.

Reconstructing Forgiveness

Thanks in large part to the impact of Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, Turkish society experienced a breakthrough and began the process of reconstructing a common memory based on the recognition of the tragedy inflicted upon the Armenians. While many "gold diggers" still loot the ruins of Armenian churches and houses, others rely on memorial tourism. Some Kurdish leaders in Turkey's east, such as former mayor of Diyarbakir Osman Baydemir, were keen to initiate the reconstruction of historic Armenian places of worship and to rehabilitate the memory of the Armenians.

Towards a Yerevan–Erbil Axis?

Located just a few hundred kilometers from the Republic of Armenia, the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan is a significant regional player with a booming economy, even as all neighboring states have rejected the possibility of its formal independence. The constitution of the Kurdistan region stipulates that five seats must be allocated for Christians, five for Turkmens and one seat for Armenians. Welcoming a refugee population equivalent to a fifth of the 5.3 million inhabitants of the autonomous region, Erbil intends to make the protection of minorities a tool of soft power. The Armenians who live in the Christian suburb of Ankawa, where an Armenian Apostolic Church was recently consecrated, enjoy complete freedom of worship and accommodate themselves to Kurdish power.

Strengthening the relationship between Armenia and the Kurdish Autonomous Region is above all a strategic issue. Kurds are called to become a buffer between Armenia and pan-Turkism. Armenians, like other Christian minorities in the region, have found a haven from the barbarism of ISIS and the sectarianism that is prevalent throughout Iraq.

The Republic of Armenia can play an important diplomatic role by serving as a voice for the cause of minorities in the Middle East within multilateral bodies like the UN. The Yazidi community in Armenia (a significant minority) constitutes one of the strongest diasporas in the world with Germany and Georgia. It is a bridge between Armenia and autonomous Kurdistan where the "Vatican" of the Yazidis is located in Lalech.

Moreover, Erbil offers enormous economic opportunities for Armenian businessmen. In accordance with the Iraqi constitution, 17% of oil revenue is allocated to the budget of the autonomous region. While there are no longer direct flights from Yerevan to Erbil, a significant step was taken with the inauguration of the Consulate of the Republic of Armenia in Erbil in February 2021, two years after the consecration of the new Armenian church in the city with funding from the Kurdish regional government.

Identity Entrepreneurs in Northern Syria

Little attention has been paid to the Armenian community in the territories under the control of the Kurdish forces of the PYD -- the Syrian branch of the PKK. This organization has appropriated many community assets and exerts continuous pressure on Christian families to enroll their men in militia ranks. Pressure is also exerted on schools and churches to submit to their laws and their "re-education" programs. But it is also in Rojava, the Kurdish name given to the autonomous region established in North-Eastern Syria, that the Nubar Ozanian battalion, named after the revolutionary Armenian internationalist who died fighting Turkish forces, was established. The following year, in January 2020, an Armenian Social Council was [created](#). This political-educational structure serves Islamized Armenians in the region who wish to learn the language of their ancestors. Supervised by executives of the PYD, the students learn Armenian language and history as well as ideological tenets that form the basis of the political model of Rojava. This political model is based on a utopian vision founded on a political order founded on decentralization, emancipation of women, and libertarian municipalism developed in the 1970s by Murray Bookchin.

While the perception of the Armenian-Kurdish relationship still comes up against reality and its contradictions, the potential of a strategic partnership remains as important as it is under-exploited.

Footnotes: Adnan Çelik and Namık Kemal Dinç, *Yıllık Ahl Toplumsal Hafızanın Izinde. 1915 Diyarbekir*, Istanbul: Ismail Beşikçi Vakfı, 2015.

Comments



S. Dermelkonian – 2023-02-10 07:53:40

Dear Tigran, congratulation for this meticulous examination, unique as far as I know. Mamekan (Mamigonian), Vreshdick (Reshdouni) and several other tribes have Armenian origin. One day could help to form solid Armenian-Kurdish alliance against Pan Touran to Survive in long centuries Fatherland. All depends on Kurdish side to be sincere allies not losing again independence for the looting habit with bloody ferocity. Wishing you All the Best.