Polatel, Mehmet. 2025. *Armenians and Land Disputes in the Ottoman Empire, 1850–1914*. Edinburgh University Press. 312 pages. ISBN: 9781399528603 (hardback).

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On a hot summer day in 1915, a young Armenian man named Manaseh rode through a valley full of human corpses, accompanied by a Muslim *bey* and his son. Manaseh, now renamed Ali and made a servant of the *bey*, was going to help him locate land that had once belonged to a people whose unburied corpses were now decaying, and which had now become the *bey's* property (p. 256). This harrowing image opens the conclusion of *Armenians and Land Disputes in the Ottoman Empire, 1850–1914* by Mehmet Polatel, vividly capturing how the Armenian Genocide was not only a campaign of mass killing but also a violent reordering of land ownership that had begun long before the genocide itself. The book situates dispossession at the heart of the mass violence against Armenians, arguing that the erasure of Armenian life was inseparable from the seizure and redistribution of their property. Through haunting narratives like Manaseh's, the author makes a compelling case that the land question was not merely a tangential issue intertwined with the violence that culminated in genocide. It was, in fact, a foundational element. The work challenges readers to reconsider familiar narratives of 1915, placing material and territorial stakes at the center of its analytical frame and connecting them to the broader questions of territoriality and nationalism.

Chronologically tracing the transformation of land disputes into the so-called Armenian Land Question, the book shows how the relationship between state, land, and people in the Ottoman Empire was increasingly shaped by violent processes. Beginning with the territorial turn of the mid-nineteenth century, Polatel demonstrates how land conflicts, initially local and economic, became deeply politicized and embedded in nationalist projects. By the 1910s, these disputes were no longer just about landownership but about sovereignty, identity, and control over territory. Violence, particularly that of the 1890s massacres, fundamentally altered the scale and nature of these disputes, making land both the means and the object of ethno-national conflict. In this framing, the book reveals how competition over land and resources contributed not only to the outbreak of intercommunal violence but also to the emergence of nationalist ideologies and claims to sovereignty.

The structure of Mehmet Polatel's *Armenians and Land Disputes in the Ottoman Empire* is methodically organized to trace the transformation of land disputes into a deeply political and ultimately violent issue.

The first chapter sets the stage by examining the mid-nineteenth-century roots of the Armenian land question against the backdrop of the transformation of the Ottoman land regime and the commodification of land. Polatel outlines several key reasons for these transformations. First, they stemmed from the rise of a centralized administrative

state, as the government sought to 'curb local powerholders' (p. 21). Second, demographic shifts played a role, particularly the settlement of nomads and large waves of Muslim immigrants. Third, the 'acceleration of the Ottoman economy's integration into the world economy and the commercialization of agriculture' (p. 23) contributed significantly. Finally, the 'rise of territorial concerns on the part of the state and various religious and nationalist groups' (p. 24) added another layer of complexity. In exploring the emergence of legal, economic, and administrative frameworks that shaped land tenure and laid the groundwork for future conflicts, the author highlights the multilayered nature of the issue, marked by tensions not only between the state and its subjects, but also among local communities. Ultimately, the chapter shows how land disputes began to take on political dimensions, developing into a broader social and political crisis among Turks, Kurds, and Armenians.

The second chapter turns to the earliest land conflicts, focusing on the emergence of what the author terms the Armenian land question. It emphasizes how local disputes over land gradually evolved into broader political struggles, as the Armenian Patriarchate, newly formed institutions such as the National Assembly, and Armenian intellectuals increasingly interpreted their grievances as systemic. By examining the approaches of Armenian institutions and intellectuals on one hand, and the Ottoman government and local powerholders – such as *beys, aghas, sheikhs, muftis,* and local officials - on the other, the chapter highlights the 'pressure for reform, the territorialization of Armenian nationalism, and the rise of new demographic concerns at the Sublime Porte' (p. 51). A central argument of the chapter is that, during the 1870s, those whose lands were appropriated were almost exclusively Armenian peasants from the eastern vilayets of Diyarbekir, Erzurum, Van, and Bitlis, with a few cases in Ankara and Trabzon (p. 53). Meanwhile, the Muslims who seized these lands were all powerholders. Thus, while also tracing the territorialization of Armenian nationalism and the internationalization of the land question, Polatel convincingly argues that during the early 1870s and before that, 'class rather than ethnic or religious differences was the main factor' shaping land disputes (p. 74).

The escalation from social and economic contestation to overt violence is the focus of the third chapter. With the rise of Sultan Abdülhamid II and the shock of the 1877–1978 Russo-Ottoman War, fears over demographic shifts intensified. The Hamidian massacres (1894–1897) are examined as a turning point, when dispossession became entangled with state-sanctioned violence, profoundly reshaping the Armenian land issue. Here, Polatel highlights a key difference from the period discussed in the previous chapter: not only Armenian peasants, but also large landowners were affected, as their properties were seized as well. Thus, 'the basis of land disputes concerning Armenians shifted from class to ethno-religious differences' (p. 83). Moreover, the violence and dispossession extended beyond the eastern vilayets to include Armenians across the empire, including in Cilicia. The seizures occurred through various means: local Kurdish and Turkish actors, along with immigrant usurpers such as Karapapakhs and Circassians, appropriated land independently, while in other cases, the state directly confiscated property (sometimes even farms and factories) and transferred it to Muslim settlers. Polatel carefully maps this process both geographically and chronologically,

showing that the patterns of land seizure varied across regions. He argues that the mass violence and Hamidian massacres ultimately transformed the land question, as thousands of Armenians were killed or fled, leaving their land vulnerable to seizure by both local actors and the state. Furthermore, while locals at various levels felt emboldened to appropriate Armenian land, the state enacted laws that allowed it to legally confiscate the property of those who had fled massacres instigated by that very state.

While orchestrating mass violence and land seizures, the Ottoman state was equally determined to control their outcomes. This is the focus of the fourth chapter, which investigates the state's active role in managing and exploiting land disputes. Drawing on correspondence among various state agencies, as well as orders, laws (such as the ban on Armenians selling land to other Armenians), and agreements issued by the Sublime Porte, the chapter explores the policies designed to shape the aftermath of Armenian dispossession. These include the settlement of Muslim immigrants on Armenian lands, and efforts to prevent Armenian refugees from returning. Polatel argues that 'instead of merely reacting to events, the central government actively shaped the outcomes of mass violence and the processes of property transfer' (p. 117). For instance, the state blocked the return of Armenians from Russia to their homes, and as Polatel notes, the concern at Yıldız Palace was not rebellion but rather their Armenian-ness itself and the potential increase of the Armenian population in the region (p. 124). Instead, the government engaged in demographic engineering by settling Muslim immigrants in formerly Armenian-inhabited provinces (p. 132).

The Young Turk Revolution of 1908 brought new hopes to oppressed Armenians, promising equality, legal protection, and a renewed debate over land ownership, an issue explored in the fifth chapter. This chapter analyzes the policy negotiations between Armenian political actors and the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), as well as the local resistance reform efforts encountered in the provinces. It vividly illustrates the interplay between central policies and local dynamics, showing how local *beys* and *aghas* became servants of the new regime. As the CUP relied on their support, the return of lands previously seized by these powerholders became a contentious issue. Many of them appealed directly to the Sublime Porte, portraying themselves as victims of unjust local officials. Even in cases where land was formally returned to Armenians, Kurdish tribes often used violence to prevent them from cultivating it. This complicated position of the government began to shift around 1910, when the CUP changed its approach to land ownership and 'began to see land as a means of ethno-religious domination' (p. 155). From that point onward, laws were implemented to restrict Armenians from reclaiming their lands and to facilitate the settlement of Muslim immigrants in formerly Armenian-inhabited regions, i.e. patterns resembling the Hamidian era. This shift was solidified by the rapprochement between Kurdish tribal leaders and the central government (p. 158). While the Armenian Patriarchate and other institutions attempted to resolve the issue through the legal channels created by the CUP such as submitting memoranda that were formally discussed by the government, the state showed little interest in resolving the underlying injustices. It was more concerned with settling immigrants and securing the loyalty of Kurdish chiefs than with addressing Armenian complains.

This shifting approach of the Young Turk government deepened with the outbreak of the Balkan Wars, during which the Ottoman Empire lost significant territories, a development explored in the sixth chapter of the book. Among the consequences of the wars, the influx of new waves of Muslim refugees and the growing strategic importance of Anatolia were directly tied to the land issue. Taking into account the role of the Great Powers, their rivalries, and the nationalization of the empire's economy, this chapter examines Armenian efforts to resolve the land question by internationalizing the reform debates. This stood in contrast to the state's approach, which aimed to domesticate these very reforms in order to reduce foreign interference (pp. 196–204). Although international pressure compelled the government to draft reform plans, tensions escalated in the provinces. As Polatel demonstrates, the attempted resolution of land disputes only deepened local distrust.

The seventh and final chapter examines the state of land disputes on the eve of the First World War, highlighting the perspectives and actions of both Armenian and Kurdish political and religious elites. By this point, the land issue was no longer merely a question of property for either side. As Polatel writes, 'at the end of this period, it was clear to all parties that what was at stake in these disputes was not only economic resources and a very critical means of production but also the key to establishing or maintaining political sovereignty and ethno-national dominance' (p. 221). The land question and related reforms had deep ethno-national significance for Armenians. Intellectuals described the emigration of Armenians from their homeland, shaped by decades of land seizure and violence, as a 'great disaster' (*medz aghed*) (pp. 223–224). Thus, the reforms were the only hope remaining. On the Kurdish side, political and religious leaders had their own reasons to resist reforms, viewing them as a potential path toward Christian dominance and as pressure to return seized lands. Within this context, rising Kurdish nationalism began to incorporate territorial claims (p. 226). The tensions were further intensified by Russian interference. As Polatel shows, while Russia supported Armenian demands for reform, it also provided backing to Kurdish powerholders and political elites who opposed those same reforms (p. 225). By this time, mistrust had reached such a level that even sincere reform efforts often failed or provoked hostility. In 1914, the land issue was closely tied to the competing territorial claims of Armenian, Kurdish, and Turkish nationalisms. This chapter concludes the book by reinforcing one of its central arguments: unresolved land disputes and failed reforms played a key role in creating the conditions that led to the genocidal violence that followed.

Although the book presents a thoroughly researched and compelling narrative, certain methodological choices and contextual gaps warrant further elaboration to enhance the clarity and scope of the study. The first issue is methodological. Ostensibly, to support his argument, Mehmet Polatel draws on an impressively rich and diverse body of primary sources. The book is grounded in extensive archival research, particularly from the T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı (Ottoman State Archive) in Istanbul, the National Archives of the United Kingdom in London, the AGBU Nubar Library in Paris, and the USC Shoah Foundation. However, while the author makes impressive use of a wide range of primary sources, enriching the narra-

tive with detail and depth, the criteria for selecting these sources remain unclear. For instance, out of the many Armenian periodicals available at the time, the author draws only on *Azadamart* and *Harach*, while other contemporary publications are not considered. This raises the question of how the author chose which periodicals to include. The same concern applies to other categories of primary sources as well.

Second, although the book focuses on the Armenian land question, it also effectively highlights the role of other stakeholders, particularly Kurdish tribal leaders. This raises further questions: Who were these figures? How did the Kurdish tribal system shape land conflicts? And how did nomadic Kurds become instruments not only of the Ottoman state but also of external powers? While it is understandable that the book cannot offer a comprehensive account of Kurdish history or the development of Kurdish nationalism, a brief discussion of the structure of Kurdish tribal life and the key actors involved would help address questions likely to arise in the reader's mind.

Despite these minor shortcomings, the book stands as a significant contribution to the study of late Ottoman history. Taken together, its seven chapters construct a comprehensive and compelling narrative that weaves land, violence, and nationalism into a cohesive analytical framework. In doing so, the book addresses not only empirical developments but also engages with the complex theoretical questions surrounding the interplay between violence and nationalism.