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Turkey, the World and the Armenian Question

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Citizens and politicians living in Western Europe tend to take the high moral ground on issues here they are not themselves directly involved. This is a strategy that runs the risk of applying double standards. It is all very nice to condemn the so-called Armenian genocide by the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the last century; but what about the national sins of ne's own country? In addition to the holocaust, Germany committed genocide against the erero tribe in then Southwest Africa, France slaughtered 200.000 Muslims in Algeria 1954-1962 and what about King Leopold's Ghost in the Belgian Congo? The list is much longer. Turks do not have a monopoly on human deficit.

A number of governments and national parliaments ask Turkey that it recognizes Armenia's laims of genocide. These governments include France, Belgium, Russia, Lebanon, Uruguay, Switzerland, Greece, and Canada. The European Parliament and a number of U.S. states have also recognized the slaughtering of Ottoman Armenians as stemming from a systematic policy of extermination. Turkey fears that the U.S. Congress may soon follow. Recently, the German parliament adopted a resolution in which the word genocide was not used but still called on the Turks to confront their past.

The official Turkish reaction to all these resolutions has been defensive. A historical Conference on the Armenian issue is a case in point. It was canceled a day before it was scheduled to take place in May 2005 at Istanbul's Bogaziçi University. The conference, "Ottoman Armenians During the Decline of the Empire: Issues of Scientific Responsibility and Democracy," was organized by historians from three of Turkey's leading universities, Bogaziçi, Istanbul Bilgi, and Sabanci. The organizers said the conference would have been the first in Turkey on the Armenian question not set up by state authorities or government-affiliated historians. Government officials had pressured the organizers, first to include participants of the government's choosing, then to cancel the event. The Turkish Minister of Justice, Cemil Cicek, even considered the conference 'a dagger in the back of the Turkish people' and said it amounted to 'treason'.ⁱ[1] But over the ensuing four months, the ruling Justice and Development Party made it clear that Cicek's remarks reflected his views, and his alone. The minister of foreign affairs, Abdullah Gul, announced that he had no problem with the expression of critical opinion and even said he would be willing to participate in the conference.

Despite legal manoeuvring by Turkish nationalists that had threatened to prevent, the meeting was rescheduled in September at Bogaziçi, University. It was once again postponed on the eve of its opening, this time because of a legal challenge that questioned its scientific validity and the qualifications of its participants. The challengers also said it was inappropriate for Bogaziçi, a public university, to be the venue for such a gathering, which they said contravened its mission.ⁱⁱ[2] By transferring the event from the public Bogazici to one of the co-sponsoring private universities the legal obstacles were overcome and the conference could be held. Many nationalists in the street, however, expressed their feelings of resentment.

The upcoming trial of acclaimed author Orhan Pamuk, charged with "denigrating" Turkish identity for talking about the killing of Kurds and Armenians, has also triggered a national backlash. Fortunately, few people expect that Pamuk will actually run the risk of being charged. The national backlash it provoked, however, did not fail to impress the world.

Hence, Turkey finds itself in a difficult position. A growing number of national Parliaments around the world wants Ankara to come to terms with the Armenian question but public opinion and politics in Turkey remains sharply divided on this issue. There seem to be at least three good reasons why Turkey should try to confront its own past. The question whether the Turks really committed genocide in the past should not be seen as a sign of treason but as a chance to reflect on the national heritage. Secondly, if Turkish society and politics come to terms with the past it will only serve to increase Ankara's diplomatic leverage in the world since so many governments would welcome this attitude. And finally, if the Turks will objectively deal with their past this will impress the world and make it, therefore, more difficult for the opponents of Turkish membership of the EU to derail the ongoing negotiations. Seen from this perspective, Turks who take a defensive stance seem well advised to abandon it and ask some pertinent

questions: Did the Ottoman Turks really commit genocide? And, Is the Turkish government handling this sensitive issue well?

Did the Turks commit genocide?

In article 2 of the present United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the crime of Genocide (adopted 9 December 1948), genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, such as:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

The problem in identifying whether genocide was committed is the clause: in whole or in part. In part, implies that most wars involve an element of genocide. Genocide only has real meaning if a government intends to destroy an entire group of human beings. The Armenian side claims that the Ottoman government at the highest level had the intention to kill Armenians.ⁱⁱⁱ[3] So far, there is no such proof in the Ottoman Archives. There is however, some proof that high level Turkish administrators indeed seem to have had this intention. Eyewitness reports of German, American, Austrian, and Swiss missionaries, as well as German and Austrian officers and diplomats who were in constant contact with Ottoman authorities seem to imply such an intention. Moreover, evidence given to the post-war Ottoman tribunal investigating the Armenian massacres support this claim. Lastly, to a certain extent, memoirs of Unionist officers and administrators indicate intentional acts.^{iv}[4]

All of this indicates that even if the Ottoman government was not involved in genocide, an inner circle within the Committee of Union and Progress under the direction of Mehmet Talât Pasha wanted to solve the Eastern Question^v[5] by the extermination of the Armenians and that it used “relocation” as a cloak for this policy. Some of the provincial governors and party chiefs assisted in this extermination, others did not. The fact remains, however, that some high level Turks used the deportations as a smoke screen to solve the Armenian question once and for all. For them the genocide claim seems appropriate.^{vi}[6]

There are, however, important mitigating circumstances. First, Russian expansion and the Young Turks intellectual fascination with the concept of the nation state put the Armenians in a

very difficult position. One might not expect the Young Turks to give Armenians a free ride in their new country, when their empire is close to collapse. The Young Turks might have panicked and overreacted but the Armenian challenge was a formidable one and came at a very dangerous time. Second, muslims that behaved badly were to some extent the same muslims, or relatives, of those that had escaped from the Balkans during the preceding successive Balkan Wars and were determined never to be forced to leave their ancestral homes again. Third, Armenians collaborated with Russians to kill many muslims themselves. Fourth, not all Armenians were deported. Those living in Istanbul and Izmir were unaffected.vii[7] At the end of the day, however, it boils down to a brutal act of ethnic cleansing that also involved the other parts of Anatolia and even Thrace and that was to some extent planned by Talât Pasha. Henry Morgenthau, the American Ambassador to Turkey, when protesting the killings of the Armenians reported Talât Pasha as having said, , “that it is no use for you to argue, we have already disposed of three-quarters of the Armenians; there are non left in Bitlis, Van and Erzerum. The hatred between the Turks and the Armenians is now so intense that we have to finish them. If we do not they will plan their revenge.”viii[8]

This is not to say, however, that one could consider the Armenian massacre and the German holocaust to belong to the same category.

Differences between the Armenian massacre and the German Holocaust

Today, the German Holocaust of the Jewish population is widely compared to that of the Armenian massacre. However there are important differences between the two.ix[9]

First, Jews had done nothing wrong. They were just there and formed the basis of Hitler’s blatant racism. There is little doubt that the Turks overreacted to the Armenian challenge, but some Armenians did collaborate with the Russian enemy and some of them were involved in guerrilla like activities behind Ottoman defensive lines. This does not justify the Turkish position, but it is wrong to portray the Armenians as completely innocent.

Second, in Hitler’s Germany, those in power knew what the Nazi’s were doing with the Jews. Most of them chose to support his policies. In Turkey, not all the members of the Turkish government were aware that some of them were using the deportations as an instrument of ethnic cleansing. When they discovered this, they tried to punish the perpetrators. Unfortunately, some of the perpetrators remained in power or acquired even higher positions.

Third, there was no pre-planned genocide in Turkey, as in the case with the holocaust. No pre-1914 Ottoman government could have had foreknowledge of the outbreak of the First World War or the circumstances under which the deportations would be accomplished. Mainstream Ottoman politics included normal Armenian participation until war began. There is not only no evidence that the CUP government deliberately planned for genocide before 1914, it is also highly unlikely. It would suggest that it intended to carry out the mass murder of an ethnic group

something for which there was no precedent in modern history. Moreover, if there would have been plans and these would have leaked out, intense international opposition perhaps leading to an invasion of the Ottoman empire by other European Powers would have been the result. Viewed in this light, it seems most implausible that the genocide of the Armenians was pre-planned.

Fourth, the historians who question the intention of the Turks to commit genocide are often excellent historians like Bernard Lewis and Gilles Veinstein with some documentary evidence on their side. They are not mendacious anti-Semitic crackpots who enunciate Holocaust denial. And lastly, the CUP never adopted an all-embracing secular, universalistic, quasimesianic ideology in the style of Nazism and Communism. It remained rooted in traditional (although modernising) nationalism and a vision of an Islamified Turkey. The events can be read as a botched, wartime panic, overreaction, with premeditation most unlikely and the scale of killings arguably exaggerated.

Let us try to put these qualifications into perspective. Even if the Armenian massacre cannot be compared to the German Holocaust, even if not all members of the CUP government knew that some of their colleagues were bent on solving the Eastern question once and for all, the fact remains that between 600 and 900.000 Armenians died of murder, starvation, and exhaustion. Do the Turks really confront themselves with these dark pages out of their past?

Are the Turks handling this issue well?

More and more Parliaments are adopting resolutions that state Turkey should accept the genocide claim if it wants to become a member of the EU. Turkey is unable to present its side of the story. The reasons are simple: even if the Turks did not commit genocide, they still behaved rather badly. Killing between 600 and 900.000 Armenians is and remains a horrible thing.^[10] The rich American Armenian lobby will not find it very difficult to shed light on these black pages of Ottoman history even if the Armenians themselves were not exactly angels either.

From a political and psychological perspective, the Turks are simply on the receiving end. We also have to stress the asymmetrical power relations between Turkey and the EU. It is clear that Turkey gains economically and politically more from the EU than vice versa, at least this is how the EU perceives it. This implies that everything that enhances Turkish position in the world is more than welcome for Ankara. And Turkey's position would undoubtedly become much better if the Armenian Question could somehow be removed from the international agenda.

How could that be done?

The Turkish proposal that both countries set up a joint commission of historians to determine whether the massacres carried out between 1915 and 1917 constituted genocide has been rejected by the Armenians. Turkey had proposed this idea earlier and it did not strike a chord in the Armenian camp.

It is difficult to see whether this proposal in itself could really settle the issue. The nature of historical debate is incompatible with the idea of international dispute settlement. Historians will always disagree on controversial issues like this. Moreover, many relevant archives are destroyed or lost. Hence, historical truth is almost always incomplete and unsatisfactory from a legal point of view. Every historian who wants to rescue Talât Pasha's tarnished image with new sources will always have to take the existing sources into account. The result will be trench warfare between historians that could easily last for decades.

The solution has to come from pragmatic and flexible diplomacy. Unfortunately, the existing domestic political consensus that Turkey did not commit genocide does not give much room for manoeuvring. The only way to break out of this mould is to have charismatic political leaders try to convince Turks on the street that only a flexible approach will serve their interests. It will become more difficult for Turkey to become part of the EU if the Armenian shadow continues to haunt world opinion. The electorate has to be informed about this unpleasant fact.

It is clear what the Armenians want: reparations, border revisions and recognition of the genocide claim.

What can the Turks do?

It will not be easy to open up the border since it is also linked to the highly explosive Nagorno Karabakh conflict. As a result of the war against Nagorno-Karabakh independence, Azerbaijanis were driven out of Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as territories adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh; and these are still under control of the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenian military.^{xi[11]} This conflict as well as the Armenian constitution's nonrecognition of Turkey's eastern borders and territorial integrity and the attempt to seek international recognition of the 1915 genocide, led Turkey to close its frontiers with Armenia in 1992.

Since the closed border has hurt the interests of both Turkey and Armenia it seems to offer a starting point for negotiations. Both Trade from Georgia to Turkey and from Armenia to Moscow via Georgia is highly inefficient because of taxes, bribery and corruption. Consequently, this suboptimal trade route has impeded economic growth in the north-eastern Turkish border

region. And the closure has also failed to arrest Armenian trade through Georgia and Iran.

In this context a bargain, at least on paper, may be possible. If Armenia would be prepared to recognize the existing Turkey's borders and territorial integrity, Turkey should respond in normalizing economic and diplomatic relations with Armenia which would boil down to the opening of its eastern border for trade with Armenia and allow its airspace for the transit of goods, including aid, to Armenia.xii[12]

It seems wise not to make progress in the negotiations dependent on the issue of the so-called Armenian genocide simply because here the positions are almost impossible to reconcile. A reconciliation committee of historians will undoubtedly talk for years. The Turks will presumably try to find a formula in which the word genocide is substituted by tragedy and offer to honour every year the victims on both sides. Perhaps the Turkish government can intensify their efforts to restore Armenian historical artefacts. It is, however, unlikely that these concessions will satisfy the Armenians. Perhaps EU pressure on Ankara to establish cordial relations with all its neighbours including Armenia will be helpful at the end of the day. Perhaps if the EU would be willing to negotiate a Neighbourhood Agreement with Armenia with substantial benefits for Armenia conditioned upon progress in relations with Turkey this would help too.xiii[13] Again, however, it seems wise to limit the negotiations initially to a deal on opening the border in exchange for acceptance of the existing Turkey's borders.

If, however, at the end of the day some deal could be arranged on the so-called Armenian genocide this would surely increase the Turkish diplomatic leverage inside the EU. After all, Turkish EU membership has not become easier after the referenda in France and the Netherlands. It will also be the subject of a referendum in numerous countries. And we also know that a majority of the Western European population rejects the idea of Turkey joining the EU directly but if Ankara would meet all the criteria after lengthy negotiations amounting to 10 years or more opposition diminishes. The Turkish government has taken some courageous steps concerning Cyprus. If it can also maintain the momentum for political and economic reform, as well as improving Turkey's relations with Armenia and the Kurds, it will have a positive impact on public opinion in Europe.

It is often claimed that Turkey needs accession negotiations to keep the pressure on domestic reforms. Angela Merkel, Nicolas Sarkozy and some Austrian politicians, however, still do favour a special arrangement. Perhaps the geopolitical argument that Europe would actually benefit from including Turkey in the Union will, in the end, prevail, but that is far from certain. In this analysis cuts ice, Turkish politicians have to be up to the challenge of keeping momentum for reform even without the prospect of full EU membership. That challenge requires a fundamental shift in domestic Turkish politics and discourse. Fortunately, Turkish politicians do realize that reform is not only needed for EU accession but also for the sake of Turkey itself. In fact they recoined the Copenhagen criteria in Ankara criteria. Unfortunately, Turkish politicians have a habit of accusing the Turkish government of a sell out whenever Ankara makes a concession.

This political culture makes it harder to adopt a flexible diplomacy.

Atatürks dictum that a Turkey contemplating pan-Turkish or Muslim dreams will only produce disaster, is still valid.^{xiv}[14] Turkish politicians must accept that the EU will never accept new member countries that do not seem able to establish normal relations with their neighbouring countries. And Turkish politicians must not only accept this but also try to inform their voters about this. It will be extremely difficult to sell this to the Turkish public.

At the end of the day, all foreign policy is domestic politics. Only statesmen can break out of this mould.

i[1] Aisha Labi, *ACADEME TODAY: The Chronicle of Higher Education's Daily Report*, May 27, 2005, 'Academic Conference in Turkey on Armenian Question Is Canceled Under Government Pressure'

ii[2] Aisha Labi, *ACADEME TODAY: The Chronicle of Higher Education's Daily Report*, 26 September 2005, 'Despite Late Challenge, Scholars Finally Hold Meeting in Turkey on Armenian Genocide'

iii[3] Vahakn N. Dadrian, *The history of the Armenian genocide: ethnic conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia*, Providence/Oxford, Berghahn, 1997

iv[4] I follow here the verdict of the Dutch Professor Erik-Jan Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, Tauris, London/New York, 2004, pp. 114-117. A number of provincial party chiefs assisted in this extermination, which was organized primarily through the *Teskilat-I Mahsusa* under the direction of its political director (and CUP central committee member) Bahaettin Sakir. Some provincial governors like Dr. Mehmet Resit in Diyarbakir, were themselves instigators of large-scale persecutions, but there were also governors and army officers who refused to cooperate. These were overruled or replaced. The party bosses took the real decisions on the ground in this matter. Unfortunately the records of the *Teskilat-I Mahsusa* have been destroyed and those of the CUP lost which makes it hard, if not impossible to prove the exact extent of the involvement of the different persons and institutions, but it can no longer be denied that the CUP instigated a centrally controlled policy of extermination. The pattern of extermination was roughly the same everywhere

v[5] Russia and Austria-Hungary had been involved in intensive discussions on the 'Eastern Question' since late 1875. Austria considered the survival of the Ottoman Empire as a vital interest. If Ottoman control faltered Austria had to take over control of these areas. In Russia, however, Ottoman decline was seen as a chance to express Pan-Slav solidarity with the southern Slavs.

vi[6] Erik-Jan Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, Tauris, London/New York, 2004, pp. 116-117

vii[7] A. Mango, *Atatürk*, John Murray, London, 1999, p. 161

viii[8] H. Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau's story*, New York, Doubleday, Page & Co, p. 307-309, 321-323

ix[9] This section is based on: W.D. Rubinstein, *Genocide*, Longman, London, 2004, pp. 127-146

x[10] These figures are calculated by Justin McCarthy, *Death and exile; the ethnic cleansing of Ottoman Muslims, 1821-1922*, Princeton, 1995. Zürcher seems to accept his calculations: *Turkey a Modern History*, Tauris, London, 2004, p. 115

xi[11] With the alleged support of Soviet/Russian military forces, Azeris forced out tens of thousand Armenians from Shahumyan region (a region adjacent to Soviet era Nagorno-Karabakh that joined self-proclaimed Nagorno Karabakh Republic in 1991)

xii[12] See: Michael Emerson and Nathalie Tocci, 'Turkey as bridgehead and spearhead: integrating EU and Turkish foreign policy', *Turkish Political Quarterly*, fall 2004 pp. 153-197. See especially pp. 168-171

xiii[13] *Idem*, pp. 170

xiv[14] A. Mango, *The Turks Today*, John Murray, London, 2004, p.33