

ERDOĞAN AND HIS ARMENIAN PROBLEM

This article examines the history of how Turkish leaders –the current Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in particular– have tried to deal with the Armenian Question. Erdoğan, due to his own political philosophy, rooted in Islamic conservatism had the chance to recognize and denounce the mistreatment of the Armenians at the hands of the Ittihadists, since the latter's policies had nothing to do with religion, but rather with nationalist principals that were dominant in the final years of the Ottoman Empire, and installed into the Republican regime in its early years. However, Erdoğan, like his predecessors, failed to make the right choice.

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When the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan came to power in Turkey in 2002, there were reasons to think that they would correct the state policies for dealing with history, particularly regarding the treatment of Armenians by the Ottoman government during the First World War. It would have been too much to expect, even then, that the new government would accept the characterization of deportations and massacres of Armenians as genocide. At the least, there was a chance that they would distance themselves from the policies of the Committee of Union and Progress (*Ittihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti* in Turkish, abbreviated as CUP in this article) that produced that genocide during that war. There was also reason to believe that the new Prime Minister and AKP would distance themselves from the policies of previous governments in Republican Turkey that minimized the scope of the tragedy, denied its intentionality, and spent enormous amounts of time, energy, resources, and international political capital over decades to campaign against the characterization of these events as genocide.



There were reasons for my hope that AKP would change the official approach of Turkey to dealing with Armenian history, despite my equally eternal and hopeless intellectual bent to doubt my own optimism. Though it now appears very possible that I was mistaken, I still have some hope. Why I was optimistic and why I may have been mistaken is the subject of this article.

Republican Turkey and its Arguments

Except for the brief interlude immediately following the end of the First World War, when Ottoman military tribunals tried and convicted the CUP leaders for their treatment of Armenians during the War, the Turkish state has followed a problematic and largely failed policy in its accounting of events. By now an overwhelming number of scholars of the period and of genocide have determined that what happened to Armenians during the War was indeed genocide. So have a significant number of states and their legislative bodies internationally. To the extent that Turkish official policy has been able to impact the characterization

of these events by the U.S. and some others, has revealed that the reluctance of the latter is due to political and geo-political considerations and not on the historical evidence.

In different ways and at a variety of forums Republican Turkey –the state and its official historians and scholars following the state line– have argued that:

- i) The intention was to deport the Armenians and subsequent deaths resulted from unsanitary conditions for deportees, as well as from a civil war-type of conflict between Armenians and Muslims;¹
- ii) Losses of Armenian lives did not exceed a number between 300,000 and 600,000, no more than Muslim losses;
- iii) To the extent that the state had any involvement, deportations were due to the fact that “Armenians” –all Armenians, the 90 year olds and those yet to be born– presented a threat to the security of the state. These policies were, therefore, justified;
- iv) Thus the wholesale deportations and massacres of the Empire’s Armenian subjects did not amount to what would eventually be characterized as a genocide, that these policies were not intended to “exterminate a nation,” the latter being a common international description of these policies at the time of their occurrence;
- v) The term “genocide”, having been coined in 1948, could not be applied to events that took place during the First World War.²

In other words, Turkey argued that what occurred in 1915 was hardly unusual or extraordinary. The sentiment was along the lines of: “We did not do it; besides, Armenians deserved it.”

1 It is significant that in assessing the number of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire before the deportations and massacres and the number of Armenian lives lost, and in presenting these arguments, the number of Armenians, an ethnic group, is compared to that of “Muslims”, not Turks. The figures for Muslims included Kurds, Arabs, Albanians, a variety of *muhajirs* or recent immigrants from the Balkans, the Caucasus, etc.

2 The argument claiming that the term genocide was coined after the events in question is irrelevant for this discussion. The term “syphilis”, describing a particular disease, was coined in the late 19th century. That does not mean the disease itself was originated with the word; it had existed for centuries; it just had not received a name. I am sure music existed long before we found a name or many names for it.

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Rather than the known facts of the case, what is being fought over is in the realm of the politics of genocide recognition.³ The fact that the campaign for recognition is colored by the role it plays in Armenian communities –the organization and legitimization of power– does not change the character of what happened; nor does the fact that these campaigns are used on occasion by various countries and international organizations to deride Turkey, fairly or unfairly, in its attempts to join the EU or advance its interests regionally or internationally.

Dealing with Official Turkish Arguments

The purpose of this article is not to counter the arguments of the Turkish state and associated scholars. As far as scholarship is concerned, historians, including sociologists, legal scholars, genocide specialists, and myself have dealt with these arguments extensively, in detail and adequately. While much work needs still to be done in working out various dimensions, the position of the Turkish state and its official historians has been eroding as scholarship –not just by Armenian scholars– has left little doubt that what was done to Armenians in the Ottoman Empire either was planned as an extermination or amounted to one. In other words, that it was genocide as defined by the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide.

Understanding the Position of Republican Turkey

There has been significant analysis by scholars who have explored the relationship between genocide denial and the establishment of the Turkish Republic. There were, obviously, critical and organic overlaps of the personnel that were part of the CUP administration during the First Word War and the establishment of the Republic itself. One can also see that the deportations and massacres of Armenians and other non-Muslims such as Assyrians and Greeks during the First World War and the following interlude period between 1918-1923, were a necessary, even if not sufficient, condition for the establishment of a Turkish Republic as understood by its facilitators and founders.⁴ Throughout this process, Turkish leaders had come to see the Christian minorities, particularly Armenians, as the main reason for the intervention of foreign powers in the affairs of the Ottoman Empire and for the loss of territory. The problem with this perspective and the fatal consequences it engendered was, first, that by and large the Great Powers used the real social and economic problems Armenians had as excuses to extract concessions from the Ottoman state for themselves; and, second, such an approach rationalized the inclination of Ottoman rulers to ignore the real problems Armenians and others had.

3 See Gerard J. Libaridian, *The Challenge of Statehood* (Cambridge: Blue Crane Books, 1999), or its Turkish edition, *Ermenilerin Devletleşme Sınavı* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2001), and elsewhere.

4 While Jews of Istanbul were not harmed, those in Palestine were placed in camps for a period, being suspected of collusion with the British. They were released under American pressure, which did not work for the Armenians.

The Young Turks had come to power in 1908 with a quasi-liberal agenda and had reinstated the Ottoman Constitution of 1876 that had been rescinded in 1878. Armenians and other non-Muslims, just as liberal Muslims, supported the Young Turk Revolution. They expected the reinstated Ottoman Parliament to become the actual branch of government that should and could effectuate political, social, and economic reforms. These proposed reforms –agrarian, but also legal and administrative– were not only intended to improve the lot of Ottoman subjects –and not only non-Muslim subjects– but in doing so also preempt the need for foreign intervention to bring about such reforms and thus make the continuation of the Ottoman state possible.

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For a complex set of reasons, the leaders of the Ottoman Empire determined after 1908 that such a path as insisted upon by the more liberal elements of the Ottoman political spectrum that included Armenians toward the preservation of the Ottoman state was not the desirable one. They opted for another way to save the Empire and to ensure that power was held by a specific ethnic/religious group; and they had a very different vision in mind for the state. The new Turkish state i) had to have a centralized and unitary structure, with a strong military as the final arbiter of state affairs, and ii) would have to be immune to foreign intervention by their radical methods of elimination of elements that were prone to make demands of the state; it was assumed that the Empire’s Muslims were the least vulnerable to dangerous liberal ideas and that they would all become good Turks in the state that would emerge from the First World War. What the CUP did, made the new Republic possible. But the elimination of the liberal political impulses –no matter where these came from, Muslims or Christians– and the repression of any opposition had become a necessary precondition for the survival of that vision.

The official Turkish narrative of the birth of the Republic has come as close as historical interpretation allows in presenting that birth as an immaculate conception that produced the modern Turkish nation. According to this narrative, nothing more happened than a valiant struggle against imperialists; the birth of the republic was the victory of the nationalist ideal over the nationalism of others. Thus the Republic had an interest in inducing amnesia of and ignorance in many aspects of that genesis. Acceptance of the full array of measures that made that Republic possible would

have diminished the useful myth of an immaculate conception. The Turkish Republic could not have created and inspired citizens who were devoted to a Turkish nationalist ideal and nationalist state if the birth of the Republic was, somehow, connected to less than charitable policies. Nor could Turkey project itself as a modern state, in the view of such statesmen, in the international arena, if they owned up to a questionable form of behavior.

Of course, it is possible to argue that a recognition of such an event in one's past might have been a better strategy to gain acceptance in the international community as a modern state. But the *hubris* of statism and Kemalism prevented Turkish leaders from taking that route. The concept mediating between the past and the present is the persistent and omnipresent "Sèvres syndrome", which maintains that major foreign powers are always looking for an opportunity to carve up what became Turkey, as was last proposed in the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920.⁵ The recognition of a genocide in this context, has been formulated as a prelude to such a partition, against which the War of Independence (1920-22), the founding act of the Republic, had been fought.

Turkey's leaders preceding Erdoğan all shared, subscribed or acted according to this nationalistic and statist perspective.⁶ Often weak and compromised, the Prime Ministers of Turkey in the second half of the 20th century could not and would not have challenged the conventional formulas dictated, above all, by the military and what Turkish analysts have called the "deep state" in Turkey.

Erdoğan and His Armenian Problem

Considering the perspective proposed above, how has Erdoğan handled this issue since his consolidation of power?

5 There is no doubt that Western imperial powers aimed at the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, as they did of other non-Western empires. That was an essential component of Western imperialism. Yet the argument for territorial integrity is far less *sacrosanct* for an empire than for a nation-state where there is no domination over a geographically defined and repressed ethnic element. There is always a problem in designating what that more reasonable state is, i.e., where does the so-called nation-state begin and end when the empire collapses. Empires had a chance to survive if they accommodated fully the rights of non-dominant subjects individually and collectively, although none of the traditional empires managed to do that successfully. The last to fall in this respect was the Soviet empire. In Turkey's case, the question is not whether there were plans to disassemble the Ottoman Empire. There were plenty of plans; the reason those plans did not work for so long is, mainly, the rivalry between the British and Russian empires regarding who would get what. The problem of the Sèvres Syndrome is not its historical grounding, but its continuing confusion between empire and nation-state, the projection back of today's Turkey as the natural and only possible one out of the Ottoman Empire. The second problem with the Sèvres Syndrome resides in its exaggerated use during the Republic to justify the dominance of the military the defender of a hegemonic and non-democratic state.

6 Necmettin Erbakan, the leader of the Welfare Party (RP), might have been the exception but he did not have time to display an alternative new perspective; he was removed from power by the military after one year as Prime Minister in June 1997.

Erdoğan, the AKP, and the current president Abdullah Gül did not come to power through the usual political machinery in Turkey; they created a new one. More importantly, their political philosophy is derived mainly from religious concepts rather than secular nationalism. They were able to mobilize the traditionalist-voting base on different principles, rather than strictly through conventional party allegiances. They even won the support of some liberal and left leaning segments of Turkish society that were tired of the limits to democracy –including the freedom to explore and question conventional history– which had been placed in the name of state security and stability within the framework of the nationalist state. Erdoğan did not need the narrative of the nationalists to assert a modern Turkishness and project a vision for a strong homeland.

Indeed, Erdoğan challenged the role assigned by the nationalist project to the military in the construction of Republican Turkey, including the arbitrary and debilitating break with the Ottoman past promoted by the Kemalist orthodoxy. Having liberated themselves from the shackles of a by now mechanically applied and stringent framework for statehood, Erdoğan and his associates juxtaposed the democratic ideal derived from their spiritual foundations to the authoritarian system that had been developed.

Armenians, Turkish Democracy, and Turkishness

Erdoğan and his party offered an alternative definition of Turkish society, of Turkishness and, therefore of the state. At its core, this alternative had two characteristics: i) modifying and, possibly, replacing the nationalist story that had legitimized the Republic and aiming to create a new secular Turkish society, with one that relied more on moral values of a community as defined by Islam, and that is more in tune with the traditionalism and conservatism of the majority of citizens. This dimension would also allow the displaying a better understanding of the Ottoman Empire where, for most of its existence, power was legitimized on religious principles; and, as an integral part of that vision, ii) establishing a more democratic society, and a statism inspired by spiritual values rather than the “secular religion” of a nationalist statism.

“Erdoğan and the AKP could have denounced the past treatment of Armenians outright (...) by rejecting the extremist policies of the wartime CUP government, as inimical to Islamic values.”

These two issues are at the heart of the Armenian issue in Ottoman and Turkish history and historiography as well as of the Turkish narrative.

It is, indeed, possible to argue that the Ottoman policies toward Armenians veered toward massacres and eventually genocidal steps when:

- i) imperial Istanbul moved away from the traditional tolerance of Muslim states toward non-Muslims – which dates back to the time of the Prophet himself;
- ii) the CUP started relying on statist and nationalist thinking to solve the “Armenian Question”, as its leaders understood it; and,
- iii) as a result, the CUP undertook the repression of parliamentarianism, and liberal economic and political reforms that were more commonly supported by Armenian political groups and the Armenian Patriarchate, as well as other non-Turkic Muslims, such as Albanians and Arabs.

There is one dimension that has been lost to most historians and writers of our time but not to those who were observing and making decisions prior to the onset of the First World War: Armenian political parties of the time, both of a revolutionary and socialistic bent, and constituting the left-wing of the Ottoman political spectrum, welcomed the 1908 Young Turk Revolution. The Dashnaktsutium or ARF –that had not advocated an independent Armenia– had been part of the Ottoman opposition in exile, allied itself with a variety of Ottoman opposition groups. The Hnchakians had advocated independence earlier but removed that demand in 1909; they too began to consider themselves an Ottoman party, and aligned themselves with Prince Sabahaddin in opposition to the CUP and the ARF.

By and large, Armenian parties with organizational capacity and grass roots support were the last bastions of a parliamentary and representative democracy in the Ottoman Empire. In 1908 the socialistic and revolutionary Armenian parties, now banking on the idea of a common and liberal Ottoman state, were joined by the Armenian Liberal Democratic (Ramgavar, or ADL) Party, representing the interests of the Armenian wealthy and upper-middle class. The visions of these Armenian political parties differed somewhat but they all supported a version of Ottomanism that engaged all ethnic and religious groups, either through a centralized or federalized structure, where issues could be resolved internally, thus voiding the need for foreign intervention.

By 1912 the Armenian leadership concluded that the CUP was not ready to sponsor serious reforms. Although the Armenian leadership returned to the policy of asking

for help from the Great Powers, they continued to labor hard to extract reforms from the CUP for a while longer. The CUP *coup* of 1913 more or less destroyed that option of saving the Empire through reforms. More often than not, history books and articles on the Armenian issue fail to recognize that at the end of the last serious set of negotiations between the ARF and the CUP, the bottom line for the Armenian side was the demand from the CUP for agrarian reform in the Ottoman Empire and, if that was too ambitious, only in the provinces where most Armenians lived.⁷

The Turkish nationalist project was not only about the liberation of what the nationalists considered “the minimal expanse for the homeland” for their yet vaguely defined Turkish nation –yet to be created– a nation to be melded of Muslims from a variety of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. It was also important that the new state be “strong” and “virile”, i.e., dominated by a combination of a political elite and the military. This combination, first crystallized in the pre-War CUP *triumvirate* of Talat, Enver, and Cemal pashas, would not only protect the new state against foreign intervention but also from domestic enemies that might want to “weaken” the state through liberalism and a parliamentary system.⁸

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The CUP and its accolades thought that parliamentary “games” would threaten the “cohesion” of society, i.e., that parliamentarianism would make society resistant to the hierarchical structure that needed to be established, or re-established from earlier Ottoman times. What was needed, it was thought, was saving the state and reshaping society that would have a hierarchical structure, where loyalty to the state as defined by the powers that would replace religion as the primary form of self-identification.

At the end, CUP policies produced two results: i) the cleansing of elements that were strongly in favor of a representative and elected government in the Ottoman Empire, elements that were, in this case defined by their ethnicity as well as their religion; ii) the engendering of a society that took for granted the loyalty of Muslim groups

⁷ Libaridian (1987); and Libaridian, “What Was Revolutionary about Armenian Revolutionary Parties,” in Ronald G. Suny et al. (eds.), *A Question of Genocide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 82-112. See also, Dikran Kaligian, *Armenian Organization and Ideology under Ottoman Rule: 1908-1914* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishing, 2011).

⁸ This would be the precursor of what is now labeled as the “deep state”.

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could have saved the legacy of Ottoman history and its policy of tolerance –however exaggerated– by rejecting the extremist policies of the wartime CUP government, as inimical to Islamic values; and if CUP policies or their consequences can best be characterized as genocide, so be it.

Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has given the best articulation to Erdoğan's understanding of foreign policy and to the value the Ottoman legacy has in that perspective, by increasing Turkey's direct involvement in the Balkans and the Middle East, once part of the Empire. Erdoğan and Davutoğlu have justified Turkey's more intimate involvement in the affairs of Turkey's neighbors on national security concerns, which is quite understandable. But the larger framework for their thinking suggests that for Turkey's involvement in these regions is inspired by their religion-based idealization of the Ottoman experience. What they are imagining is a *Pax Ottomanica*, this conveniently imagined community that could be recreated as a *Pax Turkica*.¹⁰

It should be clear, nonetheless, that such an imagined, of not imaginary, program cannot succeed if the AKP, Prime Minister Erdoğan, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Davutoğlu cannot distinguish between the two opposing legacies of the Ottoman Empire: The tolerant one, however imperfect; and the later phase of the Ottoman experience that produced a genocide.

The issue of the fate of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire is relevant to today's quest for democracy in Turkey. Liberal democracy had to wait decades before it became

⁹ The relationship between ethnicity and religion requires, obviously, a more thorough exploration than is possible within the confines of this article.

¹⁰ This too is a suggestion that cannot be fully explored and critiqued within the confines of this article.

an issue for a large number of Turkish citizens, before citizens questioned the authoritarianism and hierarchical thinking of the early decades of Republican Turkey and were ready to break through taboos imposed by that hierarchical framework.

An Ottoman Empire, however reduced in size, or Republican Turkey would have to have been a liberal and democratic state had Armenians and other ethnic groups been part of its population.

Definitions and Interests

The two aspects of Erdoğan's initial program –a Turkish identity that relies less on ethnicity than on religion and a more democratic state– correspond to the two inter-related dimensions at the core of the historical Armenian issue: ethnicity as the basis for massacres and deportations followed by the denial of a democratic, parliamentarian Ottoman Empire.

Erdoğan and AKP could have used the Armenian issue to highlight the difference between the distant tolerant past of the Empire, which they seem to cherish, and the more nationalist late-Ottoman period, which produced the massacres and deportations. In other words, recognizing what had happened, they could have found fault with the CUP as a regime for what they could characterize as policies inspired from a soulless nationalism, just as was done with the policies of the Nazi regime as opposed to the German state and its people as such.

The Armenian issue could have been seen as a tailor-made case on which basis AKP could have extricated Turkey from a problem that refuses to dissipate, if not disappear: That he could not manage to display the delicate dimensions of history and may have fallen back on the nationalist trap constitutes his Armenian problem. A radical revision of Turkish policy could have given Erdoğan a most visible high platform for his vision for Turkey based on religious morals. Such a position would have also the corollary impact of weakening his internal adversaries, which he considered nefarious to a healthy country: the military and the deep state. After all, the leaders of the CUP, Mehmet Talat, İsmail Enver, Ahmed Cemal (the *triumvirate* of pashas), Bahattin Şakir, and the others responsible for the government's planning and execution of extermination policies did not act as devout Muslims. They only tried to use Islam to garner last minute support for their designs, first of all designs to remain in power.

In the same sense, the perpetrators of the Holocaust were all Christians but that is not why they perpetrated the Holocaust. In fact they despised Christianity, just as the

same feeling CUP and Kemalism had for their own religion, Islam.¹¹ The immediate goal of the CUP was the maintenance of the Empire; or, in its absence, the securing of a state that would help them maintain their power through the manipulation of slogans such as Pan-Islamism, Pan-Turkism, or rallying, at the end, with Turkism.

Erdogan's Tentative Steps

Interestingly enough, during their first few years and in some respects even later, there were signs that Erdogan, Gul, and the AKP embarked on a new course, even if cautiously.

When Erdogan came to power, he was much more open in his treatment of the Armenian issue, as well as on other important items, such as media freedom, independence of the judiciary, and gay rights. In the case of the Armenian issue, he wanted to leave history to historians. This was an opening, since the Turkish state had always dictated historical narratives down to every schoolbook, and has always treated scholars and journalists who thought differently as threats to national security.

Erdogan made statements indicating that it should be up to historians to determine the exact nature of what happened to Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War; he made sure that the rules governing access to Ottoman archives were eased, even though by now these are most likely cleansed of the most obviously damning documents, and the military archives are still not fully open. Rules governing the terminology used to describe those events were eased or applied less stringently. While this was partially due to internal processes, much of this openness can be explained by European requirements during Turkey's negotiations for entry into the European Union.

The two protocols signed by Turkey and Armenia in October 2009 that aimed at the normalization of relations between the two countries had an indirect but clear reference to the genocide issue. This provided further evidence that Erdogan, certainly with strong support from Gul, wished to move forward. The second protocol, which provides for the creation of an overarching interstate commission to tackle the areas of future cooperation and discussion, refers to a joint sub-commission of historians that would "implement a dialogue on the historical dimension with the aim to restore mutual confidence between the two nations, including an impartial scientific examination of the historical records and archives to define existing

¹¹ I myself am not a fan of religion, any religion. But I do recognize that organized religious systems represent one sort of attempt by humankind to reach out to an ideal. God may be humankind's best creation, except that man is not always at his best when creating or interpreting God.

problems and formulate recommendations.” This provision has been universally understood to be referring to the genocide issue.

The largely negative Armenian reaction to this provision of the protocols has received much attention, with particular reference to the Diasporan organizations’ responses in the form of demonstrations against the Armenian government’s acquiescence to a demand for such a sub-commission that clearly was imposed by the Turkish side. It was argued by these organizations and some opposition parties in Armenia that by accepting such a provision, the Armenian side had placed a question mark on the certainty that what had happened was genocide.

A more detached analysis of the document would lead us to add another client to the doubter’s list that this provision produced. If the provision in question indicated that the Armenian side is placing the truth about the genocide in question, so is the Turkish state. If the only interpretation of the language used is that the truth is as yet to be established, then the truth as propagated by Ankara and by official historians is also in question. By agreeing that the truth has yet to be established, albeit by an ambiguous sub-commission, the Turkish Republic was also recognizing, as tacitly as the Republic of Armenia, that the official Turkish position of absolute denial, which was maintained for so long and at such cost, was being challenged and moderated – at least in principle.

There were a few isolated protests by Turkish writers in this respect. But there is no doubt that Erdoğan had the political muscle to have it ratified by the Turkey’s Parliament, just as Armenia’s President Serzh Sargsyan had the muscle to have it ratified by the Armenia’s Parliament. What went wrong when neither Parliament even brought up the documents for ratification had little to do with this dimension of the protocols.¹²

Even more significantly, in 2011, Erdoğan apologized for the massacre of civilian Kurdish subjects in 1938 and 1939 in Dersim/Tunceli. The idea and gesture of an

12 The ratification of the two protocols was aborted by Turkey, which continued to link any progress in bilateral relations to progress in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that involved the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and Azerbaijan, as well as Armenia. Since 1993, Turkey has linked any progress in bilateral relations to this particular issue, indicating that ethnic solidarity is more important than other considerations.

apology itself are more important than the details. No Turkish leader had ever apologized for an atrocious policy or crime that the Ottoman or Turkish state had ever committed against its own subjects. Indeed, such gestures are much more recent in general, even in the international arena. It is true that Mustafa Kemal criticized the CUP for atrocities against Ottoman Christians, while members of that party who shared responsibility for those massacres and deportations later served the nationalist cause under him. Even then, there had been no apology; Mustafa Kemal was just finding a good cause to reduce the CUP as a political force without denying the favor that party had done to make a new Turkish state possible. By addressing the particular issue of the Kurds, Erdoğan set a precedent of distancing himself and his party from the early Kemalist period of the history of the Turkish Republic.

Erdoğan and the Term Genocide

It would be difficult to argue that Erdoğan and Davutoğlu are not familiar with the concept of genocide. Setting aside all international or otherwise accepted definitions of genocide, one may look at the cases where Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu have used the term genocide.

On 10 July 2009, Erdoğan accused China of “a kind of genocide,” referring to that country’s policies toward the Muslim population in Xinjiang.¹³

On 15 March 2012, Erdoğan accused Israel of genocide against Palestinians in the Gaza.¹⁴

On 11 July 2012, the 17th anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre of 8,000 Bosnians, Davutoğlu stated: “We once again strongly condemn this grave humanitarian crime, share the pain of the victims’ families and reject any attempt to underestimate or deny that the genocide occurred in Srebrenica.”¹⁵

On 14 July 2012, Prime Minister Erdoğan characterized the events in Syria as “an attempted genocide” by the government of Syria.

Additionally, Erdoğan or Davutoğlu have not objected to the use of the term genocide by others and by international tribunals, for situations that are far less sinister than what happened to Armenians in the waning years of the Ottoman Empire.

13 “Turkey Attacks China ‘Genocide,’” *BBC World*, 10 July 2009.

14 “Erdogan Accuses Israel of Genocide,” *Asbarez.com*, 15 March 2012.

15 “Srebrenica Will Never be Forgotten,” *Sabah English*, 12 July 2012.

The use of the term by these two officials describing the actions of the accused governments in cases where ethnic or religious groups are resisting policies of their governments or even attempting secession has three implications. First, numbers do not matter; 8,000 Bosnians killed qualifies the massacre as genocide. Second, intentionality does not matter: the said massacres need not be part of a plan to exterminate the whole group. Third, revolting against the government by the victim group does not disqualify the government reaction from being characterized as genocide. After all, Bosnians were in revolt against their central authority, just as Syrian rebels, Xinjiang Uighurs, and Gaza Palestinians are.

“Having initially wooed the liberal segments of Turkish society to come to power and tamed the military, Erdoğan has undertaken a campaign to muzzle the press, control the judiciary, and retreat from the liberal agenda.”

By these standards, what happened to Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War should have qualified as the maximal form of genocide.

To understand Erdoğan’s intriguing position we need to refer to yet another use of the term genocide by him, this time to deny one, a case other than the Armenian. On 9 November 2009 he reacted to the charge of genocide against the Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir for its policies toward the South Sudanese in Darfur. He rejected the charge, arguing that a Muslim could not commit genocide, by definition. As a reporter of *Today’s Zaman* has indicated, it would have been different if the Prime Minister had said any Muslim who committed genocide can no longer be considered a Muslim. That is not what he said, nor was it what he meant. Erdoğan seems to be arguing that Muslims simply cannot commit genocide by definition.¹⁶ It is possible that he does not realize that such a position makes any investigation of the policies of the CUP totally irrelevant; since according to that logic, being Muslims, what the CUP leaders did could not be characterized as genocide, by definition.

One could agree with him, if one can make the following proviso. Muslim governments, when acting in accordance with the principles established by the Prophet Muhammad as to how a Muslim state must deal with its non-Muslim subjects, should not be committing massacres and genocide.

¹⁶ Orhan Kemal Cengiz, “On Erdoğan, Genocide and Being pro-AKP,” *Today’s Zaman*, 9 November 2009, http://www.todayszaman.com/columnistDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=195224

Armenians have lived for centuries in Muslim dominated states –Iran, Arab, and African countries– and there has not been a massacre of Armenians in any of those countries at any time. In fact, it was largely Muslim piety and tolerance that led Muslim societies in the Near East –Iranians, Syrians, Lebanese, Palestinians, Iraqis, and others– to welcome the survivors of the deportations and massacres. Similarly, as memoirs and oral history reveal, it was mainly Muslim piety that led many Muslims to reject –at their own peril– the state’s death decree and save a significant number of Armenians who would have otherwise perished. This does not mean that they have been treated as equals, far from it. But there is a difference between mistreatment, inequality, discrimination, repression, and oppression, on the one hand, and genocide and massacres on the other. Muslims do commit genocide –just as Christians do– when they stray from the principles of Islam. Governments that happened to be composed of Muslims also commit genocide when they adopt policies that are inspired by ideologies such as extreme statism and nationalism.

Erdogan’s argument assumes that governments act according to their religions when, in fact, the basis of their behavior is that they are the government and define state and national interests according to a number of criteria that have little to do with the religion they –formally or otherwise– adhere to. When Erdogan is denying genocide in specific cases –such as 1915 and Sudan– he thinks he is saving Islam. That was one method to do so, but one that does not hold up to any kind of critical examination.

Erdogan could have opted for another method regarding the Armenian genocide: The genocide of the Armenian people was committed by the CUP in power. And in committing that crime, the CUP was not acting as a Muslim government but rather as a group comprised of a primarily nationalist *clique* that had taken over power illegally and used religion only to help make their policies work and “seem” sanctioned by the dominant religion, Islam. This is a perfectly legitimate political argument as well as a historically valid one.

Erdogan would have done a better service to Islam if he had presented such an argument. Rather than denying what was happening in Sudan, he could have argued, equally, that the policies of the Sudanese government in the south of that country and in Darfur were not inspired by Islam but motivated by greed and love of power, policies that had strayed from the Koranic precepts of respecting the right to life of non-Muslim “peoples of the Book.” Just because Germans were Christians does not mean that the inspiration for the Holocaust committed by the Nazi government constituted the articulation of principles enunciated by Christ.

The Official Position of the Government: Blackmail and Manipulation?

Prime Minister Erdoğan could have made that argument and resolved an extremely thorny issue, especially given his overwhelming political capital. Not only would he not have lost much of this capital, but he would also have gained international respect both from governments –including those that come under official Turkish pressure not to recognize the Armenian genocide and succumb to that pressure– and from civil societies in countless countries. But that has not happened, not yet anyway.

Officially, Turkey continues its unabated international campaign against the Armenian inspired international campaign for the recognition of the genocide. Ambassadors, consuls, and other officials as well as historians who support the official position of Turkey on this subject –whether of ethnic Turkish origin or not– propagate the official Turkish position in as many forums as possible. The government of Turkey is ready to blackmail –when it can– any other government that moves toward the recognition of the genocide. It appears that, after all, the issue has not been left to historians, after all.

However, this is not first time that blinders cover the eyes of a Turkish leader – no matter how liberal or reformist. The Armenian issue is, indeed, the blind spot of Turkish leaders' vision.

It is possible that the official Turkish position continues to reflect a deeply rooted reflexive reaction on the subject, particularly entrenched in the Foreign Ministry of the Turkish Republic. It is possible that the Prime Minister's inclination has not been articulated as a policy and, therefore, not yet permeated this powerful institution. This could be the case since the brilliant and visionary Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu has bigger issues to deal with; the Armenian issue is one that slows things down. It may very well be that the Minister has too much on his plate to pay serious attention to the vulnerabilities of the Turkish official position on the Armenian dossier.¹⁷

It is possible that both Erdoğan and Davutoğlu have too many battles to fight, domestically, regionally, and internationally, to take on this issue head on. Maybe this is an issue on which Erdoğan does not wish to spend any political capital. It is

17 Beyond the protocols, Davutoğlu did make one attempt to deal with the Armenian issue when he contacted some individuals from the Armenian Diaspora. It appears, though, that his intention was to tell these individuals about what to think and feel rather than to attempt to fully understand any Armenian point of view. If you grow up in total ignorance of an issue and are educated on the basis of a totally different narrative of your country's birth and history, then a *dossier* prepared by a few advisors is not sufficient to formulate a policy that is constructive, even for a highly intelligent minister such as Davutoğlu.

possible that Erdoğan has been in power too long and is now concerned about his legacy and that he is thinking of his legacy in conventional terms.

After all, it may not have been wise to take on the deep state, the military included, while confronting the deepest of the known secrets that lie within the birth of the modern state of Turkey and modern Turkishness. It is very difficult to lead all the revolutions necessary to revamp society and the state.

It is possible, too, that Erdoğan, Davutoğlu, and the AKP could not fully disengage themselves from the original narrative; fundamental myths are not destroyed while sharing in their assumptions.

As so many Turkish historians, sociologists, and journalists have noted in recent years, the development of democracy in Turkey is organically tied to Ankara's policies toward the Kurdish population, its views on the treatment of Armenians during the First World War, and the proper examination and appreciation of that history today.

It is not a coincidence that Erdoğan's attempt to democratize the country by dismantling the military's grip and the domination of the deep state over the country was accompanied by a certain liberalization of the official Turkish policy on the Armenian issue. It is also not a coincidence that signs are increasingly pointing to the possible replacement of one kind of deep state with another, which induces a return to the reflexive policies of previous administrations regarding the question of the recognition of the Armenian genocide.

It is possible that Erdoğan, Davutoğlu, and the AKP could not resist the temptation, so common to radically minded reformers, to use the same, ready-made methods of repression against their antagonists to achieve their vision, methods they opposed before they came to power. At the end though, the use of assumptions and methods which you had opposed, will bring you where your opponents were before you resisted and replaced them.

Maybe they did not understand that systems and regimes are characterized by how they treat the different, the other, the marginal, and the weak. The treatment of peoples in these categories tells at least as much about that society and system as what they say about themselves. Having initially wooed the liberal segments of Turkish society to come to power and tamed –for the time being– the military, Erdoğan has undertaken a campaign to muzzle the press, control the judiciary, and retreat from

the liberal agenda he had espoused earlier. We are witnessing more areas where Islamic religious values –at least as defined generally– determine policy.

A Matter of Options

When CUP came to power after the Young Turk Revolution in 1908, it had two options. The first was to resolve the Armenian Question as a matter of domestic policy. Namely, dealing with the social and economic issues raised by Armenians, who except for the minority urban middle and upper classes, were peasants, artisans, and small shopkeepers. By and large there had been a few long decades during which farmers were losing their lands and craftsmen were losing their markets, creating favorable conditions for a willingness to join an Armenian revolutionary movement. The second option was to see the Armenian Question as a foreign plot, much like the way during the Cold War, when right-wing governments in the third world wanted to see all revolts and guerrilla movements as strictly Moscow inspired, devoid of any local logic and, therefore, subject to justifiable repression.

“A potentially more or less egalitarian and representative Ottoman Empire that based its strength on actual social and economic reforms was seen as a weak state. The result was what happened in 1915.”

The Young Turks started with the first and ended up opting for the second. A potentially more or less egalitarian and representative Ottoman Empire that based its strength on actual social and economic reforms was seen as a weak state. The result was what happened in 1915.

When Erdoğan came to power, he too had options: he could have seen the Armenian issue as a matter integral to Ottoman/Turkish history, a revision of history being necessary to better pursue the democratization; or, to continue the state policies on this issue as if it is a foreign inspired conspiracy fueled by imperialists designs to break up Turkey, an issue that is otherwise alien to the essence of what Turkey is and should be.

Erdoğan gave signals opting for the first; the question is, has he, too, ended up with the second option?

Dealing with the Armenian issue requires humility, especially by those who claim to function according to deeply held and religion inspired principles of behavior, and particularly so, when the policies in question –from genocide to its denial– were in defiance of those principles. To expect that in such cases Turkey project humility may sound paradoxical: after all, Turkey is the greater power in this relationship. However, there are some issues that refuse to disappear and, with all of its power, Turkey is unable to control Armenians in the Diaspora –even if it can harm Armenians in Armenia by keeping its land border with that country closed or by other means of pressure– it cannot control the historical and scientific work of scholars in Armenia or abroad.

In a November 2010 interview with Ara Kotchounian, the editor of one of the Armenian dailies in Istanbul, *Zhamanag*, Erdoan stated:

Turkey is not in hostility with any state. We have experienced many painful events in history. But we have never seen these events as a factor of shaping the future vision. After we had victory in the Independence War, we have started a new era with all these states. Also with Armenia, we can achieve this. I believe that this is still possible. Leaving the history to historians and scientists, we can walk to the future together. However, a segment of the Armenian Diaspora does not have the same vision. This constitutes major obstacle to the process.

Sometimes leaders say more than they think they say, even the smartest and most visionary among them. This confusing statement in itself could be parsed into a long article.

There are three vital points for the reader to take away:

- Erdoan thinks history is important to Turks and Turkey, and it is so in a way that he can pick and choose which events should be remembered. Conversely, he does not think history should also be important to Armenians.
- According to Erdoan, Armenians in the Diaspora should share in his vision of Turkey/Armenia relations, when they were not consulted on the subject.
- The Diasporan Armenians –only one segment of this extremely complex entity– were able to disrupt the vision that the powerful Erdoan had for interstate relations between Armenia and Turkey.

Regardless, he could have ignored them altogether. After all, the state of Armenia did sign the protocols for the establishment of normal relations between the two countries, contrary to the opinion of that “segment of the Armenian Diaspora.” But still, the protocols failed, even though the Armenian side did accept the constitution of a joint sub-commission of historians to discover the historical truth. It is evident that a specter is haunting Erdoğan, as it has haunted those before him.

This does not bode well for the future of Turkish-Armenian relations and, generally, speaking, for Turkish democracy. Turkey needs a second liberation, liberation from taboos and unresolved issues that have been the most significant foundations and symptoms of the absence of democracy. The return to the conventional official Turkish view of the past means creating a more serious conflict with Turkish scholarship and civil society that have been moving in the opposite direction.

Since Armenia’s independence, Turkey has taken some important positive steps in bilateral relations, although there, too, it has failed to move fully forward in the establishment of normal relations. Turkey explains this failure by its linkage of progress in bilateral relations to a resolution or progress in of the Karabakh conflict. That, by and large, is another story. But it is significant that by adopting ethnic affinity as the basis of its policy regarding that conflict, Turkey has lost a great and strategic opportunity to become a significant player in the whole region. Many Armenians, in or outside Armenia, believe that the official Turkish policy in the Karabakh conflict constitutes a mere subterfuge; that, along with the denial of the genocide, it merely continues Ottoman and Turkish policies toward Armenians and Armenia in general. For that segment of the Armenian people, Turkey’s denial of the genocide constitutes a national security threat of an unrepentant state that justifies the genocidal policies.

It is possible to think of another vision that could be shared: A vision in which the Turkish state comes to terms with its past, once and for all, and liberates itself, its public officials, its diplomats, and above all, its people, from a heavy burden; a vision that would also liberate the Diasporan Armenians, who are mostly the children and descendants of the survivors of the massacres and deportations.

This may be news to the leader of a powerful state such as Turkey and his colleagues, but it is not up to them to decide what Armenians remember, and how they remember. Armenians today cannot stop thinking of those who did not survive and of a collective loss of historical proportions that is bigger than a defeat in a battle. The loss resulting from the massacres in and deportations of Armenians from their historic homeland matches, at the least, the significance of the War of Independence

“Erdoğan thinks history is important to Turks and Turkey, and it is so in a way that he can pick and choose which events should be remembered. Conversely, he does not think history should also be important to Armenians.”

that created today's Turkey. I will leave aside the argument that the successful outcome of the War of Independence came at the expense of the Armenians. From the Turkish point of view this was a necessary war led by extremely capable and visionary leaders, who considered everything else, in contemporary terminology, as collateral damage. But that collateral damage cemented the loss of a homeland for another people, who deserve, at the least respect for the memory of their victims and understanding of the meaning of the loss of homeland.

That is where Erdoğan and his colleagues should begin. Respect does not come from the constant display of power and arrogant or ignorant statements; respect is gained through the display of maturity and good judgment, values that can be easily found in the Koran.

I do not know whether the opportunity has already been lost for Turkey to deal seriously with the Armenian and other critical issues, and, by extension, the opportunity to strengthen democracy in the Turkish Republic. Let us hope not.



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WEST



EAST

