Remembering the Armenian genocide in contemporary Turkey[1]

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MEMORY BOOM AND THE POLITICS OF DENIAL

Once a taboo topic for state and society, the Armenian genocide has become an integral part of Turkish public discourse over the past fifteen years. Up until the 2000s, the annihilation of the Armenians and their expulsion from their homelands received public and political attention almost exclusively as a reaction to external triggers, such as commemorative events in the Diaspora, militant attacks on Turkish representatives by the survivor generation or international genocide debates. Public remembering in Turkey followed a stable pattern from the 1970s onwards: after a heated debate over "Armenian propaganda", the so called "Armenian issue" (*Ermeni sorunu*) fell into oblivion, until another external event triggered the same pattern of an emotionally heated, but short-term wave of collective remembering (see Bayraktar 2010).

In contrast to this externally induced and non-voluntary remembering, today the history of 1915 is addressed on a regular basis by prominent public and political voices. The list of memorial activities (exhibitions, academic conferences, public discussions, Armenian-Turkish joint projects and workshops) is long, and will certainly peak in 2015. Not least important in the context of this notable "memory boom" is the statement made by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on 24 April 2014, the international commemoration day of the Armenian genocide, where he officially presented a condolence message. For the first time in the history of the Turkish Republic, a Prime Minister remembered Armenians explicitly, albeit among others, as victims of World War I.

Compared to the long-time unwillingness to actively address the annihilation policies against the Ottoman Armenians, these developments at the State and society level indicate a considerable change in Turkey. The Turkish daily Zaman recently headlined "A request from Armenians: please forget about us for a while"[2]: this is illustrative of how the former taboo topic has moved from the margins to the centre of public debate today. In addition, and parallel to the "memory boom" in the public discourse, a growing body of literature on diverse issues related to the Armenian genocide (and other destroyed minorities in the final years of the Ottoman Empire – Syriacs, Pontic Greeks, Yezidi, to name but a few) show that the international

(1) I want to thank Bilgin Ayata and Anneleen Spiessens very much for comments and editorial help.

(2) www.zaman.com.tr (accessed 12 January 2015).

scholarly discussion continues to grow in spite of the denial politics of the Turkish State. Indeed, as academics are broaching the question of Islamized Armenians, hidden Armenians, local life of Armenians, Armenian migrant workers from the Armenian Republic, Armenian community life right after genocide and the early years of the Turkish Republic, gender issues, and Armenian orphanage, they open up new spaces to imagine Armenian presence and social reality.

Yet, the increasing number of public memory debates and the opening of new memory spaces have also led to overlook the *still* existing problem of genocide denial, considered as a problem of the Turkish State only (Hovanissian 1999; Dadrian 1999; Kaiser 2003; Ulgen 2010; Dixon 2011). The growing civil societal attention, in this context, is seen as the beginning of a "critical postnationalist" discourse (Gocek 2003; Kieser 2005; Altinay 2005). Inherently, such approaches assign the responsibility of denial to the Turkish State only. The engagement of Turkish progressives for Turkish-Armenian rapprochement appears as a path-breaking and courageous act of political activism from this perspective while the ignorance of the larger Turkish population about the Armenian genocide is assumed to be the result of state-imposed lack of knowledge.

Contrary to this widespread view, I want to draw the attention mainly on one aspect of the memory boom of the Armenian genocide in Turkey that I find rather problematic. The active engagement of Turkish progressives[3] in the discourse has been welcomed *as such* without evaluating its impact on the genocide debate in Turkey. Instead, its (seemingly) positive effects have been, by and large, taken for granted. My criticism concerns the appropriation of the memory about the Armenian genocide by Turkish progressives: on the one hand, it overshadows the importance of formal genocide acknowledgement; and on the other, the State is reified as the sole decisive actor in the denial of the Armenian genocide.

Unlike reductionist and conventional approaches to genocide denial that prioritize the Turkish State as the key actor in the debate, I prefer a discourse-oriented approach that takes the complex interplay and the "co-constitutivess" (Edkins 2007) of politics and discourse into account. My 2010 analysis, based on "critical discourse moments" (Chilton 1987) between 1973 and 2005, revealed a remarkable pervasiveness and robustness of denialist discourse patterns over time *and* across different social and political settings (Bayraktar 2010). Denialist frames that were applied in the 1980s in Turkey to counter international genocide acknowledgements, are not only still dominant, but they are part and parcel of today's discursive openings. At the same time, the active participation of the civil society in the memory discourse is exploited by the State, and serves as a key argument in its foreign relations. Turkey can now argue that the "Armenian issue" (*Ermeni sorunu*), as the genocide is generally referred to in political rhetoric, is not a taboo topic anymore. It is not without irony, then, that the State maintains its core thesis that the destruction policy of the Young Turk regime had not been systematic and intentional – and therefore was not a genocide according to the UN Convention of 1948 – by strategically pointing to the increased talk about the Armenian history of 1915 in civil society.

(3) By progressives I refer to those segments of Turkish civil society that are considered as being critical of Turkish state ideology (Kemalism) and, particularly, of the Turkish official narrative of the Armenian genocide of 1915. Hence, progressives are not a uniform group in terms of political orientations, goals nor ideas. Rather, they comprise publicly well-known intellectuals (such as academics, journalists, political activists etc.) who have access to the Turkish media, thus playing a key role in how political controversies and debates in Turkey are framed. Progressives, in the current context, actively promote and engage in addressing the destruction of the Ottoman Armenians and its legacies for Turkey's politics and society.

In this article I will present how the Armenian genocide entered Turkish public memory, and uncover the discursive patterns or "memory frames" that dominated the debate on the events of 1915. I will demonstrate how these frames not only survived over time, but resonate far beyond extreme nationalists circles. My analysis is based on long term data derived from Turkish print media during major instances of memory debates in Turkey between 1973 to 2005 (Bayraktar 2010).

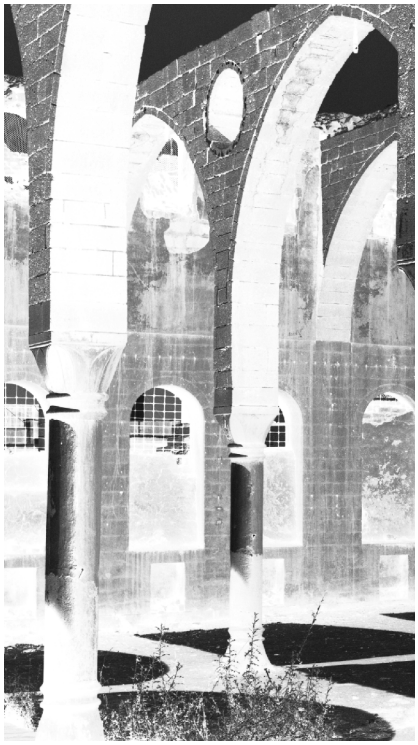
NONVOLUNTARY REMEMBRANCE AND DOMINANT MEMORY FRAMES

Rather than being a development from within, the current vital discourse in Turkey is mainly the result of continuous external pressure and efforts by Armenian survivors and descendants abroad (Bayraktar 2010). While the Armenian genocide was a topic in the early years of the Republic (Akçam 2004) and caused a public debate on its fiftieth anniversary in 1965 (Korucu & Nalci 2014), the issue was met with a deafening silence until the 1970s. The first time a relatively widespread debate about the past took place in Turkey was in 1973, when a 77-year old genocide survivor, Gourgen Yanikyan, assassinated two Turkish diplomats in Los Angeles. The attack caused a huge outrage in Turkey and inevitably broke the long-term silence. Turkish politics and society were now forced to talk about what happened in 1915.

Similar attacks by Armenian survivor generations followed in the coming years, leading to new waves of forced remembering. In contrast to the initial incident in 1973, assassinations such as those in Paris and Vienna in October 1975 were of an organized nature, signaling the beginning of a militant struggle for justice and restitution (Bobelian 2009). The Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation (ASALA) and the Justice Comandos for the Armenian Genocide (JCAG) were founded as well as some other clandestine organizations. However, memory activities and political campaigns of various Armenian Diaspora organizations had begun before militant activism. In 1965, Armenians all over the world and particularly in Lebanon rallied against forgetting and for justice. The major difference between these attempts at mobilizing political attention was that violent attacks received greater attention from the international community, as well as Turkey, than the nonviolent memory activities of various Diaspora communities.

Among the memory frames that dominated the public debate due to the externally induced and involuntary revival of the suppressed past two stand out. First, "Armenian terrorism" was identified from the start as the seemingly decisive and only explanation for Armenian memory activism. Secondly, attempts were made to contrast the Armenians in Turkey ("our Armenians") with Armenians in the Diaspora ("revenge-driven" Armenians) (Bayraktar 2010). Both frames – varying in terms of intensity and socio-political context, but equally effective as denial patterns – have been key elements in the discourse on the Armenian genocide in Turkey for the past fourty years. I will now look into the first one of these memory frames.

As a reaction to the increasing international awareness about the Armenian



genocide, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs adopted a series of institutional measures in the 1980s to explicitly and exclusively connect the history of 1915 to the militant attacks on Turkish representatives (Bayraktar 2010; Dixon 2011). Turkey diluted the topic of genocide by using the rather general frame of the "Armenian issue" and turning it into a matter of security. This strategy proved to be successful, as "Armenian terrorism" not only caught most attention within and in Turkey's foreign relations, but has been used to the present, and beyond the times of armed struggle. In 2001, when Turkey was in a critical phase regarding its bid for EU-membership and had to develop a strategy for the EU's Accession Partnership 2000, Foreign Minister Ismail Cem reminded France, which had officially acknowledged the Armenian genocide, about the dangers of "Armenian terrorism". His argument rested on the logic that just like France had not done enough for the safety of Turkish citizens during the ASALA activities, the country now was, once again, endangering Turkish migrants living in France.[4] On another occasion, in 2006, when France discussed the possibility of criminalizing the denial of the Armenian genocide, it was the speaker of the Turkish Parliament and one of the top people of the AKP, Bulent Arinc, who expressed that he was not surprised about the move and indicated that France had already before tolerated "Armenian terrorism".

However, not only state actors and nationalists promote the frame of Armenian terrorism; even more critical voices in the debate – liberals and leftists who promote Turkish-Armenian dialogue – refer to this frame as an explanation for the Turkish State's problematic engagement with its past. More precisely, the terrorism frame is considered "counter-productive" when it comes to elaborating the lack of a self-critical discourse in Turkey. Ahmet Insel, a well-known intellectual and one of the initiators of the "Apology campaign" in 2008, explained in an interview that it "would have been much easier for us to talk about the topic" if the ASALA had not been involved in militant activities. Although he agreed that ASALA probably wouldn't have existed if Turkey had confronted its past, he considers the ASALA the main cause for the belated discursive opening in Turkey. Armenian "terrorism" and its negative impact on the debate in Turkey are stressed in the recent literature on genocide denial as well. Fatma Ulgen (2010), for instance, notes that the sufferings of Turkish representatives and their "loved ones [was not] any lesser than the [sufferings of the] Armenians persecuted in 1915" (Ulgen 2010, 481). For her, although ASALA's actions do not explain the resilience in Turkish denial, they were nevertheless key in reifying the Turkish nationalist narrative and the image of Armenians as "terrorists" (Ulgen 2010, 482).

It goes without question that the news of Turkish deaths in the 1970s and 1980s had a negative effect on Turkey's position and the larger public in the debate. But was it ever ASALA's aim to breach the discursive field in Turkey and reach the Turkish public? In any case, it is improbable that violent activism, which lasted until the end of the 1980s, is the explanatory factor in the evolution of Turkish discourse on the Armenian genocide. Turkey started to adjust its standpoint only since 2000, not in reaction to a social dynamics but mainly because of intensified Turkish-EU

(4) www.milliyet.com.tr/2001/01/24/dunya/dun03.html (accessed 12 January 2015).

relations (Bayraktar 2010). It is also remarkable, in this context, that ASALA has not stopped Kurdish intellectuals and actors from addressing the Armenian genocide since the end of 1980s at a much earlier stage than the public memory debates in Turkey begun (Ayata 2009).

The persistence of the terrorism frame shows how state policy and civil society discourse converge more often than acknowledged in today's post-nationalist discourse. The terrorism narrative remains a dominant frame in public debate where it regularly pops up, regardless of the historical, political and local specificities of the case. It is very significant, for example, to see how the frame resurfaces in the discussion of Hrant Dink's assassination in 2007 (Bayraktar 2008). As the slogan "We are all Armenians", printed on placards and chanted at the funeral of Hrant Dink, was severely criticized by Turkish extremist figures, Can Dundar, a renowned Turkish journalist, defended it by bringing in the topic of Armenian terrorism and the ASALA. For him the use of the slogan was a question of "being on the side of victims, not of 'being Armenian'". To justify the slogan, he further stated: "I am sure that the same crowd would have walked with banners 'We are all families of the martyrs' as Turkish diplomats were killed cowardly by the ASALA."[5] By comparing these two cases – the murder of Turkish diplomats and the murder of Hrant Dink – Dundar suggests that these violent actions are similar and carry the same political value. Other than the fact that Armenians, in the most general sense of the word, were concerned in both events, there is simply no comparison. Invoking the frame of "Armenian terrorism" in the context of the killing of Hrant Dink, then, is a way of essentializing the conflation of Armenians and terrorism. The permanency of the Armenian terrorism frame, and its occurrence at unexpected moments, can therefore be seen as the mirror image of the silenced genocide. Talking about the Turkish victims of Armenian militancy without acknowledging that it was catalyzed by genocide denial, not only confuses cause and effect but reverses the perpetrator-victim constellation.

(5) www.milliyet.com.tr/2007/01/30/yazar/dundar.html (accessed 12 January 2015).

(6) www.ii.umich.edu/asp/academics/specialprojects/theworkshopforarmenianturkishscholarshipwats_ci (accessed 11 October 2014).

GENOCIDE: "ONLY A TERM"

It is by now widely known that the most contested aspect of the annihilation of the Armenians is its genocidal character. Turkey's attitude towards its past has changed over the years in terms of strategies and denialist patterns (Bayraktar 2010; Dixon 2011). Because of this rigid policy and the recognition struggle of the survivors, debates mostly – if not always – would end in the ever-same question about the factuality of the genocide. To circumvent this discursive constraint, scholars and activists looked therefore for alternative ways to address the events of 1915. The "Workshop for Armenian Turkish Scholarship" (WATS), founded in 2000 by scholars of the University of Michigan 2000, was such an occasion. As the founders put it themselves, the project aimed at "overcoming the politics of recognition and denial"[6] as a "move beyond the barriers that had long shackled research on the tragedies of the late Ottoman Empire and kept two communities frozen in hostility"

(Suny & Gocek 2011, 3). A series of conferences were organized, turning WATS into a seminal forum where Turkish, Armenian and other academics, civil-rights activists and even semi-officials discuss questions related to Turkish-Armenian relations, Ottoman and Armenian history in general, and the topic of the genocide during World War I. In my opinion, the importance of this project resides in its capacity to enable and reinforce Turkish-Armenian interaction.

However, WATS and similar efforts to go beyond unproductive debates about the factuality of genocide have resulted in a rather paradoxical situation: on the one hand they enabled dialogue and remembrance on the Armenian history; on the other hand, these efforts resulted in a pretty robust and *systematic avoidance* describing the history of 1915 as a genocidal event or time and again discussing how the historical events of 1915 might be best described other than as genocide. Except for a few prominent voices, Turkish intellectuals, until very recently, have been trying to bypass the term "genocide", arguing that the topic should not be reduced to "a term only". I cannot agree more that the destruction of the Ottoman Armenians is more than a term. Justified though it is, the exploration of an alternative memory for the Armenian genocide threatens to slip into a deliberate search for new ways – new terms – to describe the 1915 events other than as a genocide.

The efforts of Turkish progressives and liberal elites to promote alternative framings of the events became evident in the "Apology Campaign", an internet campaign launched in 2008 by the aforementioned sociologist Ahmet Insel, together with political scientists Baskin Oran, Cengiz Aktar and journalist Ali Bayramoglu. Within a few days, around 30,000 people signed the following text:

> My conscience does not accept the insensitivity showed to and the denial of the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to 1915. I reject this injustice and for my share, I empathize with the feelings and pain of my Armenian brothers and sisters. I apologize to them.[7]

While the campaign received unprecedented publicity, it suffered from shortcomings in terms of content, context and results. Commenting on the Turkish intellectuals' apology, Marc Mamigonian shows that the formulation is insufficient for the message to be considered a true apology: it does not point out who is responsible, nor does it identify the exact object of the apology. Instead, its vagueness allows for many different readings: the apology could be directed towards the perceived "insensitivity", the "denial of the Great Catastrophe" or the "pain" (Mamigonian 2009, 22). Taking into consideration that the text was drafted by public intellectuals who are actively involved in Armenian-Turkish relations and have a deep insight into the contested topic of the "right interpretation" of the history of 1915, this vagueness seems to be calculated.

In addition to these and other textual misgivings of the campaign, Ayda Erbal analyzes the genesis of the campaign, the conditions of its existence, as well as at the reactions from different actors. She delivers not only a comprehensive critique

(7) www.ozurdiliyoruz.com (accessed 12 January 2015).

about the hazy and even negotiationist language of the apology, but shows that the genesis of the campaign was "offensive itself" (Erbal 2012, 54), as Armenian organizations were not involved as representatives of the victims in the whole process. Actually, Ahmet Insel confirmed that the aim of the campaign was never to "talk with the Armenian Diaspora [but] to talk to the Turkish people"[8]. Erbal interprets this unwillingness to listen to the victims as the "re-creation of historical vertical power politics once again to the detriment of the offended party" (Erbal 2012, 54).

Both critics, Mamigonian and Erbal, reveal the strategic moves by the organizers, and their deliberate search to come up with a different term to qualify 1915 in order to appease Turkish nationalists and appeal Armenians at the same time. This approach proved to be ineffective. Turkish nationalists reacted with counter-campaigns demanding an apology *from* Armenians and quickly gathering eighty thousand signatures. Most importantly, by preferring the term "Great Catastrophe" to that of "genocide", the apology statement of 2008 thwarted efforts "by human rights activists and organizations within Turkey that [had] already employed the term genocide" (Ayata 2008).

Armenians are by and large united in their call for genocide acknowledgement by Turkey. The fact that Turkish critical elites advocating Turkish-Armenian rapprochement do not understand the vital importance of a formal genocide acknowledgement actually reinforces the core thesis of the Turkish state, namely that 1915 was not a deliberate and state-organized act of mass murder – a genocide according to the UN-Genocide Convention of 1948. It must be noted that, as a prominent actor (but not the only) in the denial of the Armenian genocide, the Turkish state has never denied the human tragedy itself. Indeed, Foreign ministry officials who have been key in defining Turkey's politics of the past – Sukru Elekdag, Gunduz Aktan, Omer Engin Lutem, Pulat Tacar, to name but a few – never denied that 1915 was a tremendous loss, an era of interethnic conflict in which Armenians and others have suffered (see Bayraktar 2010). These state actors, representing the nationalist and Kemalist movement in Turkey, in fact "only" denied the *systematic* and *intentional* dimension of the mass destruction and of the forced deportations policies of the Young Turk regime.

(8) www.birikimdergisi.com (accessed 12 January 2015).

CONCLUSION

In spite of the recent memory boom and the increased dialogue about the Armenian genocide in Turkey, in qualitative terms there seems to be more of a continuity than a rupture in denialist discourse. The more people talk about the Armenian history of 1915 in Turkey, the more the fundamental aspect of the denial discourse is disregarded, even amongst genocide scholars. For instance, Ugur Ungör (2014) has recently argued that the Turkish state was not able to erase the Armenian genocide from social memory, thereby referring to the existing vivid memories particularly in the South-eastern part of Turkey where the genocide took place. Ungör concludes: "The Turkish government is denying a genocide that its own population remembers."

What such an approach overlooks or simply confuses is that official denial does not equal to a lack of collective or social memory. On the contrary, the existence of mere memories about the Armenian genocide and the public talk about it have become integral to the State's denialist program. Ahmet Davutoglu for instance, instrumentalized the memory boom as Foreign Minister in 2010 by stating: "Just ten years ago the Armenian question was taboo in Turkey, but now our public freely discusses it. The events in the early twentieth century were denied before, and now Turkey does not deny that Armenians suffered tragic events." (quoted in Phillips 2012, 19) Hence, the fact that the Armenian genocide could not be erased from social memory does not make the political refusal of formally acknowledging the intentional dimension of the crime less effective. For all that academics and civil society took up the challenge to remember the genocide of 1915, it seems that we still do not recognize the basic "mechanics" of genocide denial.

The Turkish liberals and progressives who have been participating in the Turkish-Armenian dialogue over the past ten to fifteen years, have been internationally praised for their courage and path breaking initiatives – and rightly so. It is problematic, however, that the emergence of a strong civil society has become an end in itself. As soon as critics point to the shortcomings of the debate in civil society and of the engagement amongst Turkish public intellectuals, they are accused of creating unrealistic expectations and overlooking the unsafe political situation in Turkey. In my opinion, political and social constraints do not justify a development that undermines the victims' needs and their claims for moral and material justice – if this is even possible after a whole century. Political pragmatism should not eclipse the victims' hopes and expectations – rather their expectations should be the actual starting point for all efforts to achieve reconciliation and justice. ▮

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