



Even though a growing recognition has emerged among academics and public intellectuals in Turkey, the Armenian Genocide is still officially denied. | Photo: mrsamisnow via flickr | CC BY 2.0

The Politics of Silence in Turkey: The Armenian Genocide on Its 110th Anniversary and a Memory Under Siege

22. April 2025 Eldad Ben Aharon

As the world marks the 110th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide on 24 April 2025, the enduring power of denialism continues to shape how the Genocide is remembered – or deliberately forgotten. Since the centennial in 2015, Turkey has significantly altered its denial policy in response to evolving [international norms](#) surrounding the recognition of the Armenian Genocide.

What Is the Normative Change?

From the late Cold War period through the post-Cold War era, parliaments, governments, and international bodies often used vague terms such as “[Armenian tragedy](#),” “Armenian catastrophe,” or “Armenian question” to refer to the 1915 events. However, since the 100th anniversary in 2015, the recognition of the Armenian Genocide as an [international norm](#) has grown significantly stronger. The normative change is reflected in the steady replacement of ambiguous language with the more definitive term, “Armenian Genocide”. The term refers to the mass killing and deportation of Armenians carried out by the Ottoman Empire during World War I, which claimed the lives of approximately 1.5 million Armenians.

Recognition of the 1915 Genocide gained global momentum, with countries in South America – such as Chile, Paraguay, and [Brazil](#) – alongside North American actors like Canada and the [U.S.](#) However, beyond the Americas, the European momentum also garnered significant attention. The European Union (EU) played a particularly vocal role in this shift. The European Parliament (EP) first recognized the Armenian Genocide in 1987 and [reaffirmed](#) this recognition in 2015. Since then, over 20 EU member states formally recognized the Armenian Genocide, including France, Germany, [Italy](#), the Netherlands, and [Sweden](#). Within the EU, this recognition has evolved into a normative benchmark.

How Have These Changes Affected Turkey?

In response to growing international recognition since 2015, Turkey’s stance has begun to shift. While the Armenian Genocide is still officially denied, a more nuanced picture has emerged. Since the early 2000s, academic and public discourse within Turkey has increasingly engaged with the historical realities of the Armenian Genocide, reflecting a gradual opening in certain intellectual and civil society circles. A strategic step occurred in 2014, when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan extended [condolences](#) to the descendants of Armenian victims – marking the first such gesture by a Turkish head of state. This move aimed to reduce international criticism while [maintaining](#) Turkey’s official position of denial.

While acknowledging some basic facts, he carefully avoided using the term genocide. As he stated: “And it is with this hope and belief that we wish that the Armenians who lost their lives in the context of the early 20th century rest in peace, and we convey our condolences to their grandchildren.”

Nevertheless, a dual policy is evident. Erdoğan is largely untroubled by foreign governments or parliaments recognizing the Genocide, often viewing such gestures as symbolic and non-threatening to his political standing. Turkey’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs continues to [condemn](#) these recognitions and assert that they lack legal authority, even while maintaining or improving [economic](#) relations with countries such as Germany and the United States that have recognized the 1915 Genocide.

Inside Turkey, however, Erdoğan and his close political circle have become increasingly vigilant and repressive in controlling how the 1915 Genocide is discussed domestically – particularly since the formation of the ruling [coalition](#) between the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the ultranationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). This development reflects broader transformations in Turkey’s political structure following the [failed](#) coup attempt in 2016 and the country’s subsequent shift to an executive presidency.



The eternal flame at the Tsitsernakaberd Memorial in Yerevan, Armenia, commemorates the Armenian Genocide of April 24, 1915. | Photo: Serouj Ourishian via Wikimedia Commons | CC BY-SA 3.0

Denialism from Both Ends of the Political Spectrum

The AKP-MHP coalition has adopted a distinctly Islamo-nationalist and authoritarian rhetoric, intensifying state control over historical narratives and cracking down on dissenting voices. At the same time, a secular ultranationalist opposition – such as the Zafer Party – has emerged, contributing its own form of denialism. While opposition parties are often viewed as liberal or democratic alternatives, figures like Ümit Özdağ (Zafer Party) promote hardline ethno-nationalism that mirrors [state denial](#) of the Armenian Genocide albeit from a secular, anti-refugee, and nativist perspective.

Together, these political forces reinforce denialism from both ends of the spectrum, which complicates assumptions that democratization or regime change in Turkey would necessarily lead to greater historical accountability. Although a new wave of crude denialism, led by Islamists and ultranationalists, openly defends the mass killings, some Turkish [liberals](#), secularists, and leftists have either recognized the Armenian Genocide or have [distanced](#) themselves from the issue of denialism, which was more prominent in the political consciousness of earlier generations.

Silencing and Repression

A striking example of this climate occurred in October 2024, when High Council for Broadcasting (RTÜK), Turkey's media watchdog, revoked the terrestrial broadcast license of the Istanbul-based independent radio station Açık Radyo. The move followed a program aired on [April 24th](#) – the International Day of Genocide remembrance – in which a guest referred to the 1915 atrocities as Genocide. RTÜK justified the closure by accusing the station of inciting hatred and hostility. This case highlights the broader atmosphere of fear surrounding any public acknowledgment of the 1915 Genocide within Turkey's borders.

This silencing is not merely about denial; it is about control – and its broader political context. By monopolizing how the past is discussed, Turkish authorities are waging a campaign not only against the Armenian historical experience, but also against the principles of free expression and democratic discourse. Within this framework, denial serves not just as historical revisionism but

as a means of political suppression, aligned with broader efforts to [marginalize](#) dissent and exploit divisions within the opposition.

This trend is not isolated from broader political transformations. On 19 March 2025, Istanbul mayor and [presidential candidate](#) Ekrem İmamoğlu of the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) was detained by Turkish police on charges including corruption, extortion, bribery, money laundering, and alleged support for terrorism – particularly the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). This was not the first attempt to remove him through legal means. In 2019, shortly after his narrow victory in the Istanbul mayoral election (by approximately 13,000 votes), Erdoğan's [ruling](#) AKP contested the results, citing alleged irregularities.

Moreover, Erdoğan's increasingly repressive policies are unfolding within a favorable international climate for [authoritarian regimes](#). This is reflected in the rise of figures like Donald Trump, now in his second term, and the consolidation of semi-authoritarian rule in parts of Eastern Europe – most notably under Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary.

The 110th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide highlights a paradox: as international recognition of the Armenian Genocide grows, domestic repression in Turkey intensifies. Rather than fading, denial remains deeply embedded – not only within the current ruling coalition in Turkey, but also through its institutionalization by ultranationalist opposition parties.

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