

# GENOCIDE POLITICS: PLAYERS, MOVES AND AN ENDGAME

*The issue of the events involving Armenians and Turks at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century has gained political currency over the past few decades. It involves a number of players: the Republic of Turkey, the organized Armenian Diaspora, the Republic of Armenia, the Armenians of Turkey, the Republic of Azerbaijan, and the nascent émigré groups of Turks and Azerbaijanis in the West. Whereas the Armenian parties must consolidate their efforts and present a united front, the greater onus lies on Turkey as the biggest and most significant player to achieve a lasting resolution.*

Nareg Seferian \*



\* Nareg Seferian is pursuing a degree in liberal arts at St. John's College, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

**T**he issue of what happened with the Armenians and the Turks at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century –some would specifically note the year 1915– has gained political currency for the past few decades. It is complicated, to say the least, involving divergent narratives on history and the interpretation of the causes and results of events; it touches upon national identity and psychology, alongside immense human, material and cultural losses. What further complicates this issue is how it has been played out multilaterally since the 1960s, with additional entanglements having arisen and more players becoming involved since the end of the Cold War.

It is understandable why the authorities in Ankara are reluctant to overcome the impasse with regards to “the Armenian Question”. Apart from the national psychological or cultural effects, it remains unclear how any level of admittance of planned massacres or deportations, or even genocide, would affect Turkey’s national security, territory, or economy: whether it would somehow result in forcing Turkey to pay major reparations or make concessions which could be detrimental to the state.

The Armenians, for their part, have never presented a united front on this matter. Certainly, all Armenian parties agree in regards to the basic facts, and on the necessity to have the Armenian Genocide recognized as a fact. But the endgame has never been explicitly declared or remains disputed. Indeed, what do the Armenians want from Turkey?

There are many and varied Armenian players in this context. There is an organized Armenian Diaspora, with an established presence in many parts of the Middle East, Europe, the Americas and Australia. It is divided into hardline factions on the one hand, and those willing to compromise with Turkey on the other.

There is also a state, the Republic of Armenia, with which Turkey has directly dealt. It is important to note that the Republic of Turkey and the Republic of Armenia have had their limited relations with one another in their capacities as states, that is, as sovereign political entities. But the Republic of Armenia is a new state; it has only existed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The experience of the organized Diaspora in this matter, however, is exponentially richer. And the position, especially of the hardliners, is far more entrenched.

Yet another, albeit quiet player in this field is Turkey’s very own Armenian community. This small community is often lauded by Ankara as “good Armenians”. These Armenians are full-fledged, loyal citizens of the Republic of Turkey, headed by the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople (Istanbul). However, the Armenians of

Turkey have very little wiggle room and virtually no leverage over official state policy, so their position on the matter of genocide or on the deplorable conditions of the Armenian cultural and historical heritage in Turkey has to be in line with that of the state. The circumstances are tenuous, as the assassination of the Turkish Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in January 2007 showcases. The disparity amongst the Armenians of Turkey, of the organized Diaspora and of the Homeland, has been further highlighted with the differing viewpoints on attendance of a mass at an ancient Armenian church on the island of Aghtamar (Ahtamar, Akdamar) at Lake Van, renovated in recent years by the state and converted into a museum. The hardliners condemned the allowance of a mass only once a year by the Turkish authorities as a gimmick, a public relations ploy aimed at showcasing artificial tolerance by Ankara. In contrast, the opposing point of view (expressed most vociferously by the Armenians of Turkey itself) emphasized the necessity to build on whatever potential is available to improve relations and the conditions of the Armenians within the country.

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For many Armenians, a “genocidal atmosphere” is still perceived in Turkey, even if there are no active massacres currently taking place. The state policy of genocide denial and overall negligence of the Armenian heritage in Turkey sufficiently propagates this perspective. The Armenian Genocide, in the view of many Armenians, having commenced with the massacres of the 1890s, has thus continued well beyond 1915.

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) is a significant factor in this issue as well, and it brings yet another state to the fore: the Republic of Azerbaijan. The ceasefire over the disputed territory adds to regional antagonism, for Azerbaijanis and Turks are ethnic kin, and as such, the two states concur to large degrees on their policies with regards to Armenians and Armenia. Many hard-line Armenians and many in Turkey and Azerbaijan view the Nagorno-Karabakh issue as a natural extension of a general “Armeno-Turkic animosity”, although, at least for the Republic of Armenia, it is officially a separate issue from the fate of the Armenians during the final days of the collapsing Ottoman Empire.

There also exist *émigré* groups—nascent diasporas, if you will – of those who have left Turkey and Azerbaijan for the developed world, who comprise yet another group of players in this regard; they often clash with Armenian communities in their new host countries. They have not yet organized in the same manner as the Armenians, and they certainly do not have the same diaspora roots or tradition as do many peoples in exile such as Armenians, Jews or Greeks. Most significantly, they are directly under the sway of Ankara or Baku, showing little or no divergence from the official lines of either state. One does find individuals, especially in academia, who present more balanced, or even more pro-Armenian points of view (some of

whom even living in Turkey, as a matter of fact). But when it comes to community efforts or lobbying foreign governments, such activities take place at the behest of and with resources provided directly by Turkey and Azerbaijan.

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In contrast, no resolution in any legislature of the world condemning the Armenian Genocide has ever passed with the help of any immediate efforts put forth solely by the government in Yerevan. This is an essential difference, one that is important to recognize in order to more fully comprehend the roles of the various players. Armenia as a

country certainly bears some moral, spiritual and psychological meaning for everybody in the Armenian Diaspora, but it is in reality a distant entity. As a matter of fact, most well-established Armenian churches, schools, newspapers, cultural or social organizations and institutions outdate the Republic of Armenia itself. As a result, many Armenians of the Diaspora have a difficult time appreciating the reality on the ground in the country. The Republic of Armenia has been rendered a “conventional homeland”, rather than a real, tangible state with which all Armenian people can immediately identify. In turn, the Armenians in Armenia have trouble fully appreciating the conditions and perceptions of the Diaspora, and the political positions which stem from them.

This is truly a complex, multifaceted issue, dealing with which requires immense thought, efforts and resources. However, there are two matters, in my opinion, which are clear. The Armenians have no choice but to come up with a single approach –a united Armenian front encompassing the genocide issue and the establishment of a lasting peace amongst Armenians, Turks and Azerbaijanis, including a just resolution to the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh)– and it

must be coordinated amongst groups of the organized Diaspora and the government in Yerevan, while being spearheaded by the Republic of Armenia. (This is by virtue of the fact that it alone bears the status of a sovereign state.) A state is the highest level of political organization, and efforts by such an entity offer something qualitatively different than any movement by a lobby group, charity, church or cultural organization. Unfortunately, the Republic of Armenia is fraught with corruption and ineptitude, coupled with domestic political uncertainty, not to mention general poverty and limited economic prowess. Armenia, therefore, ought to get its act together first. Only a legitimate, professional government respecting human rights and rule of law, in which all Armenians have a stake, whether citizens of the Republic of Armenia or not, would be able to lead a united Armenian effort in any direction.

That is not to absolve Turkey of any responsibility. On the contrary, the Republic of Turkey is the biggest player in all this. It is a large country, with a significant economy and one of the largest armies in the world. It is also considered a staunch NATO ally, even if there has been some movement away from rigorous alignment with the West in recent years. Indeed, Armenians who have ever spent time in Turkey, especially those of the Diaspora, are often jealous of its development and level of organization, to say nothing of the thousands of Armenians from Armenia itself who live, work and spend their holidays in Turkey, closed land border notwithstanding.

The greater powers which have an interest in the region –primarily the United States and Russia– only maintain an interest insofar as there is Turkish involvement. Indeed, Caspian energy, and Georgia as a transit route (with or without Abkhazia and South Ossetia), can only reach the West through Turkey. The involvement of Iran has slowly been on the rise, but it has not reached appreciable levels yet; the main conduit to the West has been for a long time, and remains, Turkey. By contrast, the Republic of Armenia and the Armenian people have little to offer to the world which would significantly affect the balance of powers and interests. Even though it must be admitted that there is a serious Russian presence in Armenia in economic as well as military terms, the balance would shift very swiftly in favor of Turkey and Azerbaijan, with prospects of oil and gas, tourism, industry, and trade of any attractive scale.

It is for this reason that, even though Armenia has to work on itself as a state and a nation, the greater onus lies yet with Ankara to come up with real, meaningful measures demonstrating commitment to coming to terms with its relations to the Armenian people and to the Republic of Armenia. Perhaps even outright recognition by Turkey of genocide is premature. In fact, such a move might instigate a nationalist Armenian backlash –immediate demands of reparations, of money and

territory— which, in turn, could churn up reactionary activities in Turkey and end up being counterproductive to an atmosphere of voluntary dialogue and prospective cooperation. The land border with Armenia, on the other hand, must be opened once and for all; there is no need for any diplomatic games —football or otherwise— or any protocols to be ratified. This one point is entirely in Turkey’s hands and there does not seem to be any reason for perpetuating the policy of blockading Armenia in such a manner, except for appeasing Azerbaijan. But again, as the biggest and most weighty among all the players, Turkey has the luxury of taking bold measures, as any negative repercussions would affect it minimally due to its size and importance, and also due to Turkey being the only player with the capacity to take steps which can end up really benefiting the entire region in the long term. It would only be to the credit of the leaders of Turkey to initiate and display far-sighted statesmanship.

The cultural heritage of the Armenians in Turkey ought to be treated with due and full respect as well. Churches, cemeteries, fortresses, anything related to the Christian past or the minorities of Asia Minor —the heritage of the Armenians, Greeks, Assyrians, Kurds, and others— ought to receive state support and full recognition of what they are, instead of being cherry-picked, systematically presented in a distorted manner, or simply destroyed. Further, the moderate voices of Turkey must be given greater opportunities to express themselves and disseminate their views in Turkish society.

The moderate voices also need to be heard in Armenian society, whether in the Republic or the Diaspora. Extremism from any side is the greatest hindrance to the reconciliation process. The struggle is not between an Armenian and a Turk, but rather between an extremist Armenian and an extremist Turk. The Armenian people and the people of Turkey have the capacity to come to a common understanding and come up with a working relationship at the very least. But, the political will has to be comprehensive, matched by all the parties mentioned above, alongside the greater powers who have an interest in the region.

A tall order? Certainly. Impossible? What then would be an alternative approach? The other option would be for all sides to bide their time, either for conditions in Washington, Moscow and Brussels to be somehow favorable for one side or another, and/or to commence or renew hostilities, depending on what is happening in Ankara, Yerevan or Baku. Regardless of any unlikelihood, efforts today to prevent future conflicts or to set the stage for future prospects could go a long way in Turkey, in Armenia, as well as in Azerbaijan. The opportunity cost otherwise might end up being very high indeed.