

Insights: International Peace and Security

Hrant Dink and Armenians in Turkey

To understand how far Turkey has travelled in the past generation, Hratch Tchilingirian examines the role of Hrant Dink himself in the context of the Armenian community of which he was voice, critic and emblem.

By Hratch Tchilingirian for openDemocracy.net

Monday, February 26, 2007

On 18 October 1994, a press conference called by the then Patriarch of the Armenian Church, Karekin Kazanjian, was held at the Armenian patriarchate in Kumkapi, Istanbul. It was organized to correct what the church saw as misinformation amounting to a slander campaign against the Armenian church in particular and the Armenian community in Turkey in general. The "highlight" of this campaign was an attempt by the patriarchate to voice protest against false, even lethal, accusations in Turkish media and political circles that Armenian clergymen were supporting Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) terrorists in their secessionist struggle against the Turkish state.

A photograph allegedly depicting an Armenian priest in the company of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, widely distributed on posters, was a key instrument of these accusations. Indeed, shouted slogans such as Apo, Ermeni pici ("Apo [Ocalan's nickname], Armenian bastard") were at the time commonly heard during nationalist demonstrations and street protests.

The patriarchate's communiqué on the matter categorically denied the existence of any ties between the Armenian community in Turkey and any terrorist organization, and explained that the priest in the relevant photo was not a cleric of the Armenian church. The document went on to condemn such anti-Armenian insinuations in both print and broadcast media, expressing the serious concern that such false rumors, assumptions and misrepresentations were endangering the Armenian community in Turkey and making the lives of individual Armenians difficult.

The press conference - attended by some 70 Turkish and foreign journalists - was a tense affair. Several journalists harassed the patriarch with presumptuous questions laced with innuendo about contentious issues, including the PKK and the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (Asala) - a small, Lebanon-based terrorist group that had killed 34 Turks (mainly diplomats) between 1975 and 1983, mainly in Western Europe. (Asala had no presence, links or any type of backing among Armenians in Turkey, and

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minimal support even among diaspora Armenians).

As the interrogators became increasingly belligerent, a tall figure forced himself into the heart of the journalistic mêlée. "As a member of the patriarchate's press office, I would like to answer that question", Hrant Dink announced.

He continued: "Respectable representatives of the press, we are trying to shake off from our shoulders a discomfort which causes pressure. It is for this reason that we are trying to voice our protest against a false claim. Apart from that, all your questions have been answered many times before. The Armenians of Turkey are not terrorists and they have never provided aid to terrorism, from whichever direction that may come. From now on too, this is the way it is going to be. Armenians will never support terrorism. As citizens of this country, we would like to live in peace and tranquility. This is the message of this press conference. [...] The Armenians, all Armenians in the world, especially Armenians in Turkey, at this moment have only one preoccupation: peace, peace and peace" (see Marmara [Istanbul], 19 October 1994).

This was the moment Hrant Dink fully entered public life. The occasion, the pressure, the times themselves were such that he chose - publicly, confidently and courageously - to address the "discomforts" and "burdens" put upon his community by the state and a highly politicized media. It was the moment Hrant Dink openly began to deal with the dilemma of being simultaneously a citizen of one country, Turkey, while being part of another nation, Armenia.

A time of silence

It was never going to be easy, for the challenge was at once institutional, legal and political.

The Armenian community, like that of other minorities in Turkey, experienced shame, humiliation, harassment and intimidation across the long decades from the 1950s to the 1990s without being able to speak up in its defense - and in a very different atmosphere to later controversies over Article 301 and even minimal debate about the genocide of 1915. The Armenian community in Turkey in this period was characterised by its reclusive existence and collective silence.

The defining institutions of the Armenian community in Turkey were and are the church and the school. Both faced (and face) perennial problems that kept Hrant Dink and his colleagues awake at night. The interference and heavy-handedness of the Turkish government in the Armenian community's process of electing a patriarch (in 1990, and again in 1998) were among the arduous legal problems enmeshing this key Armenian body.

On the second occasion Hrant wrote: "We are sad [...] The [Armenian] community is deeply hurt by the uncertainty created by the escalation of the senseless crisis about the election of an acting patriarch. These are trying days [...] We are observing with shame" (see "Uzgunuz", Agos, 21 August 1998).

The situation with the Armenian schools was (and is) no better. Hrant wrote many columns about the state of Armenian schools in Turkey, and took special interest in their administration. While criticizing his own community for its shortcomings, he also berated the Turkish government for imposing numerous administrative restrictions on minority (and not only Armenian) schools.

Hrant passionately recorded the constant indignities experienced by Armenian educators.

In August 1998 he wrote: "If I am not mistaken, it was three years ago [...] One of the vice-directors of the ministry of national education's Istanbul office - who was later convicted of corruption and bribe-taking - said the following to the "vice-principals" he appointed (whom the minority schools

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call "Turkish vice-principals"): 'You are our eyes and ears [...] You are to inform us of even the minutest mistakes that these people make.' He said this in the presence of the minority school principals, with total disregard for their dignity and common courtesy."

"[...] And what was I fantasising all these years [...] With my 45-year-old brain, I was thinking: 'would, one day, a minister of national education start the ceremony for the new school year in a minority school?' Sweet thoughts [...] My naïveté [...] Sorry [...]" (see "Kinkel ve Vallilik", Agos, 21 August 1998 - translated excerpts posted on www.groong.com).

A voice of dignity

Hrant Dink and his colleagues were symbols as well as agents of change in relation to the Armenian community in Turkey. They were determined to express the indignation and resentment they experienced as citizens of the Republic of Turkey. If society and the political system did not allow them to voice their fears, concerns and hopes for their community and for Turkey, the silence surrounding them - they believed - must be made audible.

It was to a large extent this combination - of the hunger to speak and the desire to address the "existential" problems surrounding the Armenian church and educational establishments - that sparked the creation of the bilingual weekly newspaper Agos in April 1996.

The five colleagues who founded Agos were: Diran Bakar, a lawyer; Luiz Bakar, also a lawyer and (since 1994) the spokesperson of the patriarchate; Harutiun Sestetian, a businessman; Anna Turay, a public-relations professional; and Hrant Dink, who at the time owned a bookshop.

The founding members - as is the case with any equivalent innovative project - were to have their differences in subsequent years. But at its heart, Agos (and Hrant in particular) remained consistent in the effort to open channels of communication and dialogue between the reclusive - and at times isolated - Armenian community and Turkish society.

Hrant defined one of the newspaper's purposes as "[trying] to identify and explain our problems to the government and to Turkish society," while acknowledging that "because of this, we sometimes have problems" (Armenian International Magazine, 11/3, March 2000). His core belief was that prejudices could be overcome by education and dialogue.

The target of this education and dialogue was not just misunderstanding and prejudice in Turkish society, but the Armenian community itself. Hrant's critical discourse about the Armenian community, and especially the Armenian patriarchate, was unpopular, costing him supporters and even friends.

In June 2001, for example, on the occasion of the 1,700th anniversary of Armenian Christianity, he wrote: "The Armenian church has suffered divisions throughout history and it is evident that it has not learned from its own history. The 'one nation - one church' rule, which has been repeated almost everywhere during these last years, is nothing but a slogan void of content" (see "Spiritual Chess", Agos, 1 June 2004 - translated from Turkish by Anahit Dagci).

At the same time, many found his passion, genuine concern and sincerity disarming. Most people in the Armenian community saw Agos as a courageous publication where issues related to Armenian identity and community were discussed with refreshing openness, reason and a genuine desire to build bridges across large divides - whether within Turkey, with Armenia or with the diaspora.

In the course of this work, Hrant came to a profound realisation: that the resolution of the problems of the Armenian community in Turkey was intimately related to the progress of tolerance, democracy and freedom in Turkey.

Armenians, here and there

Dogu Ergil observed after Hrant's death that he had "aimed to promote the idea that there are other ethnic-cultural groups in Turkey than Turks and Muslims, and [that] they can very well blend into the nation cleansed of stereotypes and biases." Hrant wanted, said Ergil, to "defend Armenians against majority fanaticism in Turkey and to defend Turks/Turkey against the fanaticism and hypocrisy of foreigners and diaspora Armenians" (see "Hrant Dink: Requiem to a Lesser Turkey", EU Turkey Civic Commission, 25 January 2007).

In recent years, the "Armenian issue" - as the problem of the genocide is referred to in Turkey - had indeed become a central theme in Hrant's public discourse. The centrality of the "Armenian issue", in fact, has come to cast a shadow over the other problems of the Armenian community in Turkey: ownership of property, community foundations, education of clergy, school administration, and church elections among them. (Why, for example, should the affairs of minorities in Turkey still be "administered" by Turkey's council of ministers, interior ministry, the security and intelligence agencies, and the foreign ministry?).

If the central, heated question of genocide came to dominate discussion of Armenians and Turkey, it is one that Hrant Dink and a considerable segment of the Armenian diaspora could not agree on. On the eve of the 24 April commemorations in 2002, for example, he addressed members of the Armenian diaspora in France in an interview with L'Express newspaper.

"Do not seek Armenian identity among the 1915 graves," he advised. "I am ready to discuss all issues with you [...] I am proud to be a Turkish Armenian. I want to represent, with my newspaper, the rebirth of this society. Armenia will never be safe unless Turkey achieves democratisation. I believe Turkey may be a chance for that young state which is on the brink of drowning. Tomorrow, thanks to Turkey, Armenia will get the chance to become neighbors with the European Union. Turkey is Armenia's only chance" (Turkish Daily News, 23 April 2002).

More than the semantics of the issue, Hrant's approach to the issue of 1915 and Turkey-Armenia relations focused on the substance of reconciliation. "I know what happened to my grandparents", he told AFP. "It does not matter what you called it: genocide, massacres or deportation" (Agence France Presse, 8 October 2000). Hrant strongly believed - to the dismay of many in the diaspora - that the more essential thing was to influence Turkish public opinion: "The winning of the empathy and compassion of the Turkish population is far more important than the adoption of Armenian resolutions in hundreds of parliaments elsewhere."

Hrant spent considerable time and energy in seeking to persuade the diaspora that there is a new dynamic and a new openness in Turkey, involving an unprecedented interest in and discussion of Armenian issues. He said that "this process has been developing very slowly, just like the democratisation of Turkey," in a way that encouraged him to believe that "the taboo [of 1915] too will be broken."

Yet anyone who is familiar with "breaking taboos" in Turkey knows the extreme dangers involved in such a process. Hrant himself was well aware of the possible consequences: "We never deny our own history. But Armenians [in Turkey] are unable to discuss it for fear it will harm the community's existence" (see Ayla Jean Yackley, "Turks confront dark chapter of Armenian massacres," Reuters, 26 April 2005).

In his response to this predicament, Hrant displayed one of his largest virtues: courage. As he wrote in openDemocracy in 2005: "Where fear is dominant, it produces symptoms of resistance to change at all levels of society. The more some people yearn and work for openness and enlightenment, the more others who are afraid of such changes struggle to keep society closed. In Turkey, the legal cases against Hrant Dink, Orhan Pamuk, Ragip Zarakolu or Murat Belge are examples of how the breaking of every taboo causes panic in the end. This is especially true of the Armenian

issue: the greatest of all taboos in Turkey, one that was present at the creation of the state and which represents the principal "other" of Turkish national identity" ("The water finds its crack: an Armenian in Turkey," 13 December 2005).

Hrant Dink "was Turkey in its complexity," wrote Dogu Ergil. "He was a Turk against Armenian extremism and an Armenian against Turkish extremism."

The day of Hrant Dink's funeral was the evidence of how far Turkey had travelled since that press conference at Istanbul's Patriarchate in 1994. More than 12 years on, the Ermeni pic epithet hurled by nationalists was overtaken by the cries of Hepimiz Ermeniz ("We are all Armenians!") in the throats of tens of thousands of Turks. Hrant himself, in his life as much as his death, had played an enormous role in bringing about that change. He opened the door to a future that Armenians and Turks must find together.

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