

the school. “The Ministry of Education sent a letter asking to remove the picture. Months of correspondence ensued over this one portrait.”¹³⁰

Despite the changes ushered by the emergence of the AK Party as a dominant political force, the situation today is such that, in the words of Selina Doğan, an Armenian attorney who was elected to Parliament on the CHP list, “none of us feel safe in such an atmosphere of violence,” particularly “as Turkey drifts toward authoritarianism.”¹³¹ Arguably, the lobbying efforts of the Armenian Diaspora around the world for the recognition of the Genocide has created a backlash in Turkey, but the condition and treatment of the Armenian community in particular and other minorities in general—in at least the first 50 decades of the Republic—are hardly mentioned in public discourse in Turkey. At best, they are described as “problematic” or “controversial” issues.¹³² Long before the backlash of the activism of the Armenian Diaspora starting in the mid 1960s and the more recent lobbying efforts in the West, the state-imposed difficulties on the Armenian community (and the non-Muslim communities) have had institutional, legal, and political implications. Indeed, the two main defining institutions of the Armenian community in Turkey, the church and the school, are in dire situation. Both institutions face enormous administrative and financial problems and occasional targeting by nationalists.¹³³ Neither the state nor successive governments in Turkey have seriously addressed the problems imposed on the community, despite promises made to the Patriarch and community leaders during formal or informal meetings in Ankara.¹³⁴

Having three Armenian Members of Parliament among their ranks since 2015, the integrationists in the Armenian community have attempted to shift the focus of the discourse from “narrow” parochial issues to the larger issue of democratization in Turkey. Rumelili and Keyman suggest that “by locating demands for equal national citizenship at the center of their negotiation of minority and national citizenship rights, Turkey’s Armenians are making significant contributions to the

¹³⁰ Interview in Istanbul, September 26, 2014.

¹³¹ Gülten Üstüntağ, “CHP deputy: Everyone, including minorities, feels less safe as Turkey drifts toward authoritarianism,” *Today’s Zaman*, 20 February 2016, http://www.todayszaman.com/interviews_chp-deputy-everyone-including-minorities-feels-less-safe-as-turkey-drifts-toward-authoritarianism_413344.html; also at <http://turkishpost.net/trending-stories/chp-deputy-everyone-including-minorities-feels-less-safe-turkey-drifts-toward-authoritarianism>.

¹³² Hratch Tchilingirian, “Recognition or Reconciliation? Turkish-Armenian relations need untangling,” *Armenian Weekly/Aztag Daily* (Special Edition), 24 April, 2006, <http://goo.gl/fzMHL1>.

¹³³ Cf. Hratch Tchilingirian, “Hrant Dink and Armenians in Turkey” in *Turkey: Writers, Politics and Free Speech, Open Democracy Quarterly* 1.2 (2007), <http://goo.gl/qhj0W3>. For instance, in May 2007 the Armenian Schools in Istanbul—Esayan, Tibrevank and Getronagan high schools, and Vartuhyan, Karagoezyan, Dadyan, Yesilkoy and Tarkmanchats primary schools—received threatening letters, entitled “Last Warning” (Son Uyari ve Ikaz). The message said: “We will mercilessly shoot [...] it will be obvious how many Turks and how many Armenians there are, and you will be the ones to count the coffins,” signed someone calling himself “Temel Malatyali.” The letter ends with Atatürk’s words: “We would like to see the reaction against these separatist groups and terror organizations as soon as possible,” a call Mustafa Kemal issued for action to the Armenians in Turkey to show their loyalty to the state by combating the efforts of dissident factions, “We know where you are,” *The Armenian Reporter*, May 19, 2007; see also “*Acimasızca vururuz*” (We would beat mercilessly), *Yeni Şafak*, January 29, 2010, <http://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/acimasizca-vururuz-238396> (accessed March 2, 2016).

¹³⁴ See, for instance, “Armenian patriarch meets top officials in Ankara,” *Turkish Daily News*, December 17, 1998, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/armenian-patriarch-meets-top-officials-in-ankara.aspx?pageID=438&n=armenian-patriarch-meets-top-officials-in-ankara-1998-12-17> (accessed March 2, 2016); “Patriarch Meets Top Officials in Ankara,” *Lraper Church Bulletin* (Istanbul), February 14, 2001, or “Une journée à Ankara. Sa Béatitude, Mesrob Mutafian reçue par les autorités turques,” *Nouvelles D’Arménie*, Février 1999; “Cumhurbaşkanı Sezer Patrik Hazretlerini Kabul Etiler” (President Sezer received His Beatitude the Patriarch), *Lraper* 1 (2001): 3.

democratization and pluralization of Turkish politics.”¹³⁵ But there is a price to be paid for such “significant contributions,” which generally does not figure in the discourse of those liberal and progressive circles in society who support and are the beneficiaries of such “contributions.” The costs for Armenians have ranged from coercive measures to lethal consequences. On the other hand, the isolationists struggle—through perennial petitions to the government and state agencies or legal action where possible—to maintain what little has been left to the Armenian minority. Although dozens of properties that were confiscated by the state have been returned, there are still hundreds of cases that remain unresolved and ever buried in oceans of bureaucracy and legal disputes. The integrationists see the resolution of their community problems in the context of the larger Democratic Project in Turkey. As such, they see themselves as agents of democracy and freedom in Turkey rather than solely representatives of an ethnic community and its comparatively “small issues.” Paylan explains: “We are radical democrats and we have everyone sitting at our table. This is why we have to struggle for LGBT rights, for the Armenians, the Kurds, and the Alevis. We have to offer equality to every identity.”¹³⁶ It is claimed that *Agos* is not viewed just as an Armenian newspaper in Turkey, but as a newspaper promoting democracy. Its editorial policy includes attention to “issues of democratization, minority rights, coming to terms with the past, the protection and development of pluralism in Turkey.”¹³⁷ And this is where the two schools of thought diverge: the isolationists believe such an “opening to society” and the herculean task of carrying out a Democratic Project in Turkey by members of a minority group is not only not realistic, but is also risky as it exposes the community to a nationalist backlash with lethal consequences. As Murat Mıhçı, a member of the HDP cautioned: “There is always danger, especially for us Armenians there has always been danger. We know well the road we have travelled and history.”¹³⁸ The case of conscript Sevag Balıkcı is case in point. He was killed on April 24, 2011, by a fellow soldier, Kıvanç Ağaoğlu, while serving his mandatory military service in Kozluk province in Batman. The incident was presented as an “accident” and Ağaoğlu received a sentence of a mere 4 years and 5 months in prison. However, Sevag’s parents, Garabed and Ani Balıkcı, have appealed the case in an effort to reveal the truth that this was not an accident. “We feel uneasy about the fact that there is no justice,” said his father, expressing frustration that “with the dragging on of the case, we began to think that there is a hidden catch.”¹³⁹

For the isolationist Armenians there is an element of political *déjà vu*. Erdoğan seems to be following the path of his predecessors like Adnan Menderes (1950-1960) and Turgut Özal (1983-1993), who came to power with wide popular support but, within a decade, “became more autocratic and began to rely on an ever-narrowing circle of advisers.”¹⁴⁰ Once considered the champion of reforms, Erdoğan

¹³⁵ Rumelili and Keyman, “Enacting multi-layered citizenship,” 14.

¹³⁶ Nanore Barsoumian, “The Road Ahead: An Interview with Garo Paylan,” *The Armenian Weekly*, July 1, 2015. <http://armenianweekly.com/2015/07/01/the-road-ahead> (accessed March 2, 2016).

¹³⁷ See “About US” at <http://www.agos.com.tr/en/home> (accessed March 2, 2016).

¹³⁸ Murat Mıhçı, “Թուրքիոյ մէջ Հայերս միշտ ալ վտանգի տակ ենք” (In Turkey we are always in danger), *Ararat* (Beirut) September 11, 2015, 2.

¹³⁹ Vartan Estukyan, “My home where my son is: Şişli Armenian Cemetery,” *Agos*, February 3, 2016, <http://www.agos.com.tr/en/article/14561/my-home-where-my-son-is-sisli-armenian-cemetery> (accessed March 2, 2016).

¹⁴⁰ Hugh Pope, “Erdoğan’s Decade,” *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, March 29, 2012, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/turkey-cyprus/turkey/op-ed/pope-turkey-erdogans-decade.aspx> (accessed March 2, 2016).

has “entered his third term in power ill and ill-tempered, his absolute majority in parliament fighting yesterday’s sectarian battles,” observes Fiachra Gibbons.¹⁴¹ The AKP’s original promise of “justice and equality of citizenship” a decade ago has been turned into a messianic “duty” of governance entrusted to the party by “God, history and the nation,” as Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu told AKP supporters in Denizli province during the run up to the June 2015 general elections (“*Allah, tarih ve millet bizden yanadır*”).¹⁴² Doğu Ergil argues that there is a “new nationalism” in Turkey, which is very different from the nationalism of the founding Republic. “It is not Western-oriented, but rather traditional, isolationist and supports a role for religion in public life.[...] It puts the state in the center of social life as the provider and protector as well as the source of political power.”¹⁴³ And this, exactly, puts the integrationists in the Armenian community in a nearly impossible position and the isolationists in a continuous cycle of loyal accommodation.

CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude by reiterating three critical issues in this discussion. First, state discrimination against the Armenian community and the non-Muslim minorities in Turkey is as old as the Republic and has been institutionalized and structured over the decades. There are legitimate grievances and difficulties imposed by the state and zealous politicians and officials which remain largely in place. The slow and piecemeal return of properties and restoration of certain rights are made for political gains rather than as a result of a genuine intention or policy on the part of the state to give back what it has taken from the community at least during the last five decades. That includes, for instance, the opening of the Patriarchal seminary where future priests could be trained, the legal status and independence of community schools, freedom for church and community organizations to hold elections without government interference, enhancement and simplification of relations with government agencies, and a host of other existential issues. As it is, the community in Istanbul has been reduced to a tiny fraction of its former status as the center of the Western Armenian cultural renaissance.

An ongoing problem is the return of properties to Armenian trusts that are worth millions of dollars. This is essential for the future vitality of the community, not only to assure the survival of community institutions, but to help them develop and modernize. In the absence of any state assistance, Armenian community institutions and structures are maintained by heavy reliance on individual donations and major fundraising efforts. In recent years donations have gone down considerably due to the global economic downturn and regional conflicts. Thus, the income the community would receive from the potential return of hundreds of confiscated properties would provide a more secure financial future. The other side of this issue is its impact on the internal dynamics of the community. So far there is no centralized management or oversight in the community to keep an eye on funds

¹⁴¹ Fiachra Gibbons, “Turkey’s enlightenment languishes, like the journalists in its prisons,” *The Guardian*, March 13, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/libertycentral/2012/mar/13/turkey-enlightenment-journalists-prisons> (accessed March 2, 2016).

¹⁴² “Davutoğlu: Her Müslüman için cihad farz-ı ayndır” (Davutoglu: Jihad is a *Fard al-Ayn* for each Muslim), *Yeni Akit*, February 1, 2015, <http://m.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/davutoglu-her-musulman-icin- Jihad-farz-i-ayndir-50176.html> (accessed March 2, 2016).

¹⁴³ Doğu Ergil, “Identity Crises and Political Instability in Turkey,” *Journal of International Affairs* 54.1 (Fall 2000), 58-59.

generated through the properties that have already been returned. Due to a government ban on elections and other administrative restrictions, currently only a small group of trustees in each trust have the legal right to decide as they please about what to do with the large funds they have. For instance, reportedly millions were wasted on the school in Topkapı. “We are spending these community funds, but we should be the guardians of those funds,” lamented Bedros Şirinoğlu, a prominent community leader and Chairman of the Surp Pirgic Hospiat Trust, warning that “under the current circumstances, the community is seriously decaying.”¹⁴⁴ An editorial in *Jamanak* was even more alarmed about “the internal struggles for influence” among different groups and institutions that “pose a serious threat to the community” and even “create threats of dismemberment of the community.”¹⁴⁵

Second, on the socio-political level, the Armenian community in Turkey for a century now has not only lived as the constant “other,” reinforced through state-imposed restrictions, administrative hurdles, and arbitrary treatment, but has been forced to participate in the state and societal denial of the Genocide, at least through their silence and loyalty to the state. Sevan Deyirmenchyan, a writer, teacher, and newspaper editor, is not optimistic about the coming years: “Since the denial is continuing, since coming to terms [with history] is delayed, we will continue to hear [hate-mongering] utterances; we will still witness many threats and sometimes their execution” in Turkey.¹⁴⁶ Denialist and anti-Armenian discourse continue to be published in school textbooks, disseminated through public-opinion shaping outlets, and heard through official government platforms and in society at large.

Third, a decade ago, many had thought, including minorities lawyer Murat Cano, that “the process of destroying the non-Muslim minorities in Turkey has ended.”¹⁴⁷ However, such hopes have dissipated. Turkey seems to be returning to its earlier hegemonic political system, a system where education, media and political processes are controlled, and “the state’s tight grip on society is legitimized by rallying people around the nation-state.”¹⁴⁸ As in the past, crime and politics remain entangled in public life. Navaro-Yashin observes that the social panic caused by media stories of various unresolved incidents and events, “remains submerged in the bodies, psyches, habits, and unconsciousness of subjects of the Turkish state only to be recalled with the emergence of fresh anxieties.”¹⁴⁹

Finally, as long as the state and the political establishment speak about what are the basic rights of the community as if they are handing out “privileges” or “favors,” the isolationists in the community will continue to remain silent and loyal in order to “protect” what they have. The price of illusive physical, psychological, and material *security* is being the “other” in one’s own native land. As such, the community would most likely remain “ideologically” divided as the integrationists would not accept such a humiliating reality. A hundred years after the Genocide, thanks to the

¹⁴⁴ “Ծանրաբերուած Օրակարգ” (Heavy agenda) *Jamanak*, October 27, 2015, 1.

¹⁴⁵ “Հայախօսութեան հետամուտները կը պիտակաւորուին՝ որպէս ազգայնականներ, տկարացած է մամուլ-դպրոց կապը, ազդեցութեան պայքարները անդամալուծութեան վտանգ կը ստեղծեն համայնքին առջեւ” (Those who advocate speaking Armenian are labelled nationalist, media-school link is weakened, the struggles for influence generate threat of disability for the community), *Jamanak*, February 12, 2016, 1.

¹⁴⁶ Sevan Deyirmenchyan, “Նոյն Սպառնալիքը՝ 101 Տարի Անց” (The same threat 101 years later), *Nor Yañach*, March 5, 2016, 4.

¹⁴⁷ “Lawyer Cano: ‘The state withholds documents from its courts,’” *Turkish Daily News*, February 10, 2001.

¹⁴⁸ Ergil, “Identity Crises,” 46.

¹⁴⁹ Navaro-Yashin, *Faces of the State*, 183.

Turkish state and society, the Armenians in Turkey find themselves somewhere between isolation and dis/integration. As one young Armenian academic in Istanbul surmised: “The future of the Armenian community in Turkey is bleak, not only because of the political and legal environment, but because social and career opportunities are not satisfactory.”¹⁵⁰

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¹⁵⁰ Interview in Istanbul, September 22, 2014.