

# Recognition or Reconciliation?

## Turkish-Armenian relations need untangling

**Hratch Tchilingirian**

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

NINETY YEARS AFTER THE MOST CATASTROPHIC episode in Armenian history, the Genocide of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire remains the most problematic and determinant factor in Turkish-Armenian relations. For decades, Armenian expectations and demands for recognition by Turkey have been "reciprocated" by official Turkish denial. In recent years, however, the ideas of "reconciliation" and "dialogue" in Turkish-Armenian relations are gaining currency in Turkey. Nevertheless, the issue is not simple, but multi-faceted and complex.

The various aspects of the genocide of the Armenians during WWI must be untangled and properly understood. First, there are at least three key dimensions: moral, political and legal. In the current discourse of the sides, especially in Turkey, these critical dimensions are not distinguished.

Indeed, most of the time they are blurred and muddled. Second, the approaches to -- or "feelings" towards -- the issues are not monolithic. To ascribe views or positions to the "Armenians," or to speak of the "Armenian position" without qualifiers as the view of the entire Armenian nation is misleading and inaccurate. Such sweeping generalizations are common among, for example, journalists and nationalists in Turkey.

Likewise, there are varying views and positions in Turkey and among the Turks. When, for example, Armenian pundits speak about "the Turkish position" without qualifiers, they present an imprecise picture and ignore many important factors within Turkish society. Certainly, the understanding - and eventual resolution - of such a complex and history-laden event requires clarification of strands of thoughts, positions, actors and relations.

And finally, there are at least three main groups

and views that need to be distinguished: the official government positions or policies; the position and views of political and public organizations; and the views in the "general public."

While many aspects of the positions and discourse of these groups overlap, the emphasis they put on one or the other dimension of the genocide (i.e., moral, political, legal) is significant for the process of analyzing and understanding the problematic Armenian-Turkish relations. Government officials give greater importance to political and legal issues than, say, moral issues. Political parties prioritize certain aspects of the genocide issue and Turkish-Armenian relations that fit their organizational agendas and public persona. Public organizations tend to emphasize reconciliatory approaches rather than "historical facts."

The case of the controversial and failed Turkish Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC), which had the tacit backing of the Turkish and Armenian governments, is one example.

However, the least heard voice in the current discourse on the genocide is the views of the public in both Armenian and Turkish societies. Indeed, during conversations and discussions in Turkey and Europe, many of my Turkish interlocutors have openly spoken about the Genocide -- and they use the Turkish term "soykirim" to describe it.

They acknowledge the Genocide with understanding; however, they are weary of speaking about it openly, especially in Turkey, as the use of the very term "soykirim" might cause them legal troubles. The fact that the genocide is a forbidden subject in Turkey is indicative of another dimension of the moral dimension.

The positions and discourse of these various

groups have an impact on the expected (and unexpected) outcome of the process of "reconciliation" and recognition. Yet the three main dimensions of the issue remain tangled and largely misconstrued, especially in Turkey.

### **The Moral Aspect**

Arguably, for the majority of the Armenians, particularly in the diaspora, the recognition of the genocide is first and foremost a moral issue. While there are certain political parties and groups who demand not only recognition, but also historical lands, full compensation, the right of return, etc., a larger number of Armenians in the Diaspora consider the moral dimension as the key issue. A discussion of the moral aspect of the Genocide is virtually absent in Turkish public discourse.

As Vamik Volkan, a psychiatry professor at Virginia University, put it: "The deaths of relatives and ancestors at the hands of Turks were an essential part of the identity of most Armenians, while Turks were taught little about what happened in the collapse of the Ottoman Empire" (1). Many Turkish politicians, "scholars" and pundits continually and inaccurately assert that "Armenians use the genocide to preserve their identity", but fail to ask as to why there are Armenians living in some 100 countries around the world today.

Virtually all diasporan Armenians, whether in the Middle East, Europe or North America, trace their roots to the pre-genocide Armenian community in the Ottoman Empire.

Virtually all Diaspora Armenians are descendents of the survivors of the genocide.

Virtually all Diaspora Armenians have been affected by this human catastrophe; they have first hand knowledge of the tragedies experienced and lived by their grandparents; the personal memories of tragedy and destruction are part of their family history.

The Genocide is part of Armenian diaspora identity today not necessarily for political reasons or inherent anti-Turkism, as it is often presented in Turkey, but primarily because it is part of the contemporary Armenians' family history.

Several million Armenians living in the diaspora

today are the surviving descendents of those who lost everything. To say that the descendents of the victims use the Genocide "to conserve Armenian national identity", as Turkish diplomat Omer Lutem characterized the Diaspora (2), is a disingenuous escape from the responsibility to acknowledge the massive crime committed by a government against its own citizens.

The Turkish government and official Turkish history continues to deny that a genocide was committed against the Armenians, but they have failed to provide convincing explanations as to what happened to the entire Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire.

Whether there were 300,000 (as often cited by Turkish sources) or 500,000 or a million victims, the acknowledgement and apology for a crime is not a matter of numbers, but a matter of action taken, the 'cleansing' of an entire group.

Whether it is called genocide, crimes against humanity, massacre or else, it does not change the fact that a catastrophic crime was committed against a nation.

The Turkish establishment's insistence that "no such thing has ever happened to the Armenians" is unacceptable and offensive to Armenians, and has added insult to injury. Indeed, this is an issue of moral courage and responsibility of the Turkish government and society.

Even as the political and legal aspects of the Genocide have been dominant in recent years, the moral issue comes first for the "silent majority" of Armenians in the Diaspora: an acknowledgement that their grandparents and their relatives were murdered; an apology for a crime committed against a people by the very government which was supposed to protect them. This is a significant moral issue.

### **The Political Aspect**

In my view, had the moral aspect of the Genocide been resolved, it would have created better conditions for the resolution of the political and legal issues in Turkish-Armenian relations. The absence of diplomatic relations between Armenia and Turkey and the closure of the borders are the most critical political issues.

Past and present Armenian governments have

expressed willingness to normalize relations without conditions, but Turkey has insisted on two main conditions: the resolution of the Karabakh conflict and the Armenian government's forgoing the recognition of the Genocide.

These two problems are further complicated as they are influenced by third parties: on the one hand, the Karabakh factor is influenced by the close Turkish-Azerbaijani relations; on the other, the genocide issue is influenced by public opinion, especially in the Diaspora.

Nevertheless, they are not insurmountable problems. It depends mostly on Ankara's position. It should be noted that even when the previous government of Levon Ter Petrossian in Armenia went so far as to completely set aside the Genocide issue -- and even going as far as banning the most vocal political party, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) -- Ankara was not forthcoming.

While since then it has been acknowledged by Turkish commentators that it was a mistake not to respond to Ter Petrossian's overtures, Ankara's negative response to what basically was the fulfillment of one of the conditions was taken as an indication that Turkey is not serious about normalizing relations with Armenia.

The Genocide remains an important issue for the Armenian Diaspora, especially on moral grounds. But it is very likely that ultimately the Diaspora would not interfere with the Armenian government's position vis a vis Turkey.

While some political parties and groups continue to present territorial claims and other such demands, by and large Turkey-Armenia relations are considered an "internal matter" of Armenia.

It is generally taken for granted in the Diaspora that Yerevan's policies would have a direct bearing on the countries economic development and geostrategic position and thus it is a matter best decided by Armenia and its population.

Indeed, with few exceptions, this was the Diaspora's attitude during the Ter Petrossian regime.

The Karabakh condition is more complicated than the Diaspora. It would depend on the "price" Ankara is willing to pay for normalization of relations with Armenia. For the Azerbaijani govern-

ment, Turkey's tough stance on Karabakh and blockade of Armenia are important factors in keeping the pressure on Yerevan. On the other hand, as Turkey aspires for eventual EU membership, there is growing pressure from Europe, as well as the US, to normalize relations with Armenia.

### **The Legal Aspect**

Although related, "reconciliation" is more to do with the moral aspect of the genocide than the political and legal aspects. The legal dimension and implications of the Armenian Genocide have been studied, discussed and formulated by an array of tribunals -- for example, the Turkish Military Tribunal (1919); the UN War Crimes Commission (1948); the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal, Paris (1984) and most recently the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), which was commissioned in 2003 by TARC to determine the applicability of the UN Genocide Convention to the case of the Armenians.

The report tried to say that there are neither "winners" nor "losers" in the dispute. On the one hand, the report affirms that what happened to the Armenians during World War I was a genocide as defined in the UN Genocide Convention (a conclusion that historians have been asserting for decades); on the other, the report alleviates Turkey of any legal responsibility by statutes-of-limitations argument. Perhaps both the Armenian and Turkish members of TARC expected conclusions that would have supported their own respective positions. The shortcomings of the ICTJ report, like TARC itself, were heavily criticized or rejected by certain quarters and political groups in Armenia and the Diaspora. Interestingly, TARC dissolved soon after the report was formally presented to the public.

While the question of representation in TARC is another important issue, the point for the purposes of this essay is that it was the most recent attempt by seemingly unofficial group (with official support) to address the prevailing issues in Turkish-Armenian relations.

Unfortunately, the public in the diaspora, Armenia and Turkey were not adequately exposed to the ICTJ report and the ensuing discussions. It was debated only in small circles of "specialists" and politically oriented groups and was not presented to the wider public, especially in Turkey.

While some Armenian groups dismiss the ICTJ report completely, one should not throw the baby with the water. Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that Turkey does not have any legal liability, is Turkey -- based on this independent legal opinion -- willing to acknowledge that what happened to the Armenians during World War I was genocide?

This is a crucial point for the general Armenian public -- obviously not necessarily for all political parties or interest groups. At least theoretically, Turkey could acknowledge and apologize that a genocide was committed against the Armenians. Period.

And declare that it does not have any legal obligations beyond the acknowledgement. Again, what is crucial in this whole debate is the moral - the human -- dimension. Is the Turkish government in particular and society in general ready to acknowledge crimes committed against a minori-

ty in the past so that it is not repeated in the future?

Indeed, any attempt for reconciliation without this moral basis would fail to resolve the problems in Armenian-Turkish relations. Political or legal instruments alone do not resolve complex issues in human relationships, let alone among nations and neighbors, but common human values play important part in overcoming seemingly irreconcilable differences.

*Hratch Tchilingirian is Associate Director of Eurasia Programme in the Judge Institute, University of Cambridge.*

1. Douglas Frantz, "Unofficial Commission Acts to Ease Turkish-Armenian Enmity", *The New York Times*, 10 July 2001.
  2. "Two ambassadors discuss Armenian Question", *Turkish Daily News*, 22 October 2001.
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