

Approaching 2015: How to Assess Erdoğan's Statement on the Armenian Genocide?

Written by Taner Akcam

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TANER AKCAM, JUN 4 2014

The Justice and Development Party's (AKP) ascension to power in 2002 marks an important turning point in Turkish history, insofar as it marks a definitive break in the character of the Turkish ruling elite. The AKP entered into another taboo area of the republic, the Armenian Genocide, and is attempting to take a stab at changing the traditional denialist policy. However, without knowing the historical background of the policy, we cannot truly understand the recent statement of the Turkish Prime Minister about the events of 1915.

A Paradigm in Turkish Politics

There have always been two fundamental cultural-political strains that Turkey rests squarely on, whose roots go all the way back to the beginning of Ottoman modernization, dating from the late 18th century and continuing through the early 20th century. These two strains, like two sides of a personality, have been in near constant conflict. There were times when the two grew distant, too. The first one is best described as western secular modernism, the main representative of which is the civil-military bureaucracy. One of the most important political representatives of this during the Ottoman period was the Union and Progress Party, which was in power between 1908 and 1922, and which was a key organizer behind the Christian genocide that targeted mainly Armenians.

The second major strain primarily defines itself around Islamic values and cultural norms. The segment of society identifying with the latter has tried to define itself by way of many differing political parties and movements, from Ottoman times until the present, but didn't really emerge on the Turkish political scene in a robust way until the 1970s. Both differ from each other fundamentally on the questions of life-style, cultural values, and points of reference, attributes that we use to define collective identities. The disparity between these two strains intensified during the Turkish Republic era, when the western-secular-modernist strain became more radical on the subject of religion by leaning towards a western life-style and cultural norms.

Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, was the leading figure of this strain and the political movement *Kemalism* was named after him. Today the civilian-military bureaucracy and the Republican People's Party (CHP), its political arm, are representatives of this strain and in this sense represent a linear continuity starting from the Union and Progress Party.

During the republican era, the second Islamic-conservative strain found its first political manifestation, especially after 1970s, in the *Milli Nizam Partisi* (National Order Party), *Milli Selamet Partisi* (National Salvation Party), *Refah Partisi* (Welfare Party), and *Fazilet Partisi* (Virtue Party), almost all led by the late Necmettin Erbakan (who passed away last year) in the late 60s and early 70s. The AKP is an offspring of the Virtue Party and the latest manifestation of this second strain.

Today's Turkish Republic was primarily established by the military and civilian bureaucracy representing the western-secular-modernist cultural strain. Up to 2002, they administered Turkey and never let go of power. Not only did the armed forces and bureaucracy shape the Republic, but they also created a system that would not allow elected parties to even have the appearance of running the country. The groups of parties that were in power until 2002 were

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culturally western secular modernists, and politically authoritarian and anti-democratic.

This continuity also explains the roots of the Armenian-Turkish conflict and why the Genocide became a taboo in Turkey. Most of the cadres who founded the Republic had been members of the Union and Progress party which was behind the 1915 genocide. After organizing several congresses in Anatolia, cadres of the Union and Progress Party formed the People's Party in 1923 and then announced the formation of the Turkish Republic in the same year. They ruled the country as a single party until 1945. The so-called multi-party regime that came into being after 1945 was a continuation of what had prevailed before. During this period, the parties that ruled Turkey were groups that had spun off from the CHP, the sole party in power from 1923-1945.

At the beginning, the political representatives of the Islamic tradition, what I define as the second strain, took on a similar political attitude that for all intents and purposes resembled the western-secular strain. Up until AKP's election win in 2002, secular modernism and Islamic tradition stood on opposite ends of the spectrum on the issues of religion or religious values and their use of cultural codes in society. Their understanding of collective identity was divergent and they possessed completely different self-perceptions. However, despite all these differences on the issue of collective identity, there was no essential difference between them when it came to political culture. They were very similar if not the same; whether they were Islamic or secular modernist, they maintained an authoritarian tradition. They were far removed from democratic values and did not possess a political culture or tradition that was based on them. Hostility towards the West (as cultural other) and anti-Semitism were the other primary characteristics.

The AKP movement represents a rupture from this tradition. For the first time, it tried to redefine the relationship between the collective culture of the Islamic strain and political identity. The party has been attempting to merge Western liberal-democratic values, like human rights and individual freedoms, with Islamic cultural values – at least until last year when the Gezi protests broke out. It is no coincidence that the party refers to itself as “conservative democratic”. Because of this, the AKP has constituted a historic opportunity, as for the first time in Turkish history an elected government, with strong support from the second strain, has managed to push the military and bureaucracy out of the political sphere and diminished their power over the judicial-administrative system.

The AKP has not only represented a change with the ruling elite wresting power from members of the western-secular tradition and accruing it to the second Islamic strain, but also a change from an authoritarian to a more democratic system. That is why they have been engaged in a very deep-seated conflict with the military-civilian bureaucracy over the fundamental character of the regime. The conflict was evident in a number of areas and manifested itself with, among others, the *Ergenekon* and *Sledgehammer* prosecutions which lessened the military's control and guardianship over the regime; attempts to change the Republic's 90-year-old Kurdish policy of “deny and assimilate” with a “Kurdish Initiative”; investigating the “unknown perpetrators” crimes that have been committed by the military-civilian bureaucracy; and investigations into the military officers who were behind the September 12th and February 28th military coup actions.

In a nutshell, without knowing this historic background, we cannot truly understand the recent statement of the Turkish Prime Minister about the events of 1915. The AKP entered into another taboo area of the republic and is attempting to take a stab at changing the traditional denialist policy.

How Should We Assess Erdoğan's Statement?

Those who characterize Erdoğan's statement as offering something ‘totally new’ and ‘historical’ are wrong. Outside of the Prime Minister's speech, there is nothing really new being said here. These ideas and opinions have all been expressed dozens of times and in many different venues and manners, most notably by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, and usually as part of a call to preserve a “just and equitable memory” (*adil hafıza*), a protective rubric used in an effort to equate the horrors of the Armenian deportations with Turkish losses at Gallipoli and Sarikamış.

While it was essentially a repetition of statements made before, the Turkish Prime Minister's statement gave an official character to Davutoğlu's previous utterances and elevated them to the level of “official government position”; from this perspective alone we should see that it is significant and that it points to a new situation emerging. This new

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situation needs to be addressed at three levels: the first level has to do with the Prime Minister offering the Armenians his condolences for the losses they experienced in 1915; the second level involves the notion of free speech within Turkey; and the last level has to do with conceptualizing a real solution to confronting the 1915 genocide, namely the question of justice.

With regards to the first level, the fact that the Prime Minister offered his condolences is important, regardless of the motivations or purpose, as it brings the discussion down to a humanistic level. Of course, the Prime Minister did not offer his condolences solely to the Armenians; he offered the same condolences to the grandchildren of all those who perished during the First World War. Despite all the ways in which it can be criticized, the fact that the condolences brings the subject down to a more human level is extremely important and constitutes a significant change for Turkey. The dominant discourse within the statement will create a positive addition to the Genocide discussion. We can now say that those circles, which previously had fostered animosity against and refused to listen to critically thinking individuals such as myself, will now be able to listen with their ears and minds slightly more open.

The second level has to do with the issue of free speech; as is widely known, up until Hrant Dink's assassination in January 2007, it was impossible to freely discuss and debate anything about 1915 within Turkey. Those who voiced opposition against the official position of the government were seen as traitorous and had to face attacks and threats. In fact, up until the 2010 investigations and trials against the terror group known as Ergenekon, which had organized within the armed forces and bureaucracy of Turkey, individuals who talked openly about the subject of the Armenian Genocide were faced with a serious risk to their life. Hrant's assassination, the countless trials against intellectuals, and the smear campaigns against us in the daily newspapers are just some examples of this threatening atmosphere.

The fact that hundreds of thousands of people unexpectedly took part in Hrant Dink's funeral procession and that members of the Ergenekon terror organization (which had engaged in violence and led other sorts of campaigns against individuals who had opinions on the Armenian Genocide critical to that of the government) were arrested (the most prominent of whom were Doğu Perinçek, Kemal Kerişsiz, and Veli Küçük) moved Turkey into a relative atmosphere of freedom. After the case, I personally brought to court, and won against the Turkish government in the European Court of Human Rights, Article TCK 301, which made it illegal to denigrate Turkishness, is not in effective use in Turkish law. In summary, after 2010, we can comfortably state that it is possible to freely discuss the 1915 genocide within Turkey. Since then, countless television programs have been aired, newspaper articles and books have been published, and various Istanbul universities have been hosting and organizing conferences to discuss the topic.

Hence, Erdoğan's statement summarizes and defers to exactly this point. With this statement, the government is publically "normalizing" those opinions with regards to the topic of 1915 that it had, until 2010, refused to view as legitimate and had regarded to as treacherous. There are, of course, those individuals who see this step as an indicator of the government's grace and who would like to thank the government for it.

It must be conceded that this should be recognized and accepted as an important change; but if we are to give praise and proper acknowledgement to anyone, it should be the tens of thousands of individuals who marched out on the streets. We have reached this point in our history because of the struggle of these individuals. The government is, in a way, registering and, in turn, approving and confirming the place that Turkish people have reached on their own. This move by the government is a new step and a new development for Turkey. At the very least, people's opinions on the topic of the Genocide will no longer be prosecuted or labeled as treacherous. However, isn't this something that should exist within every democratic country in this world, anyway? Is Turkish society that accustomed to abuse, that when the abuser recognizes a basic human right, we fall all over ourselves being thankful?

The third level has to do with the question of justice. In other words, it has to do with the question of how to solve the issue of genocide in Turkey's past and the ripples it has created into the present day. It's a question of what should the government do to rectify this. On this level, there has been no change in the government's policies. The AKP administration is continuing the 90-year-long denial politics. The "just memory" thesis is not a very new one. The government has given up its position of blaming Armenians for genocide by softening its language, however, the

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concept of both Muslims and Armenians having experienced loss and suffering in 1915 has been a repeated discourse for 90 years. The extreme nationalist and aggressive denial period, as represented by individuals such as Yusuf Halaçoğlu and Şükrü Elekdağ, may have ended, but there has been no change in the content of the discourse.

There is one last point that has to be made: the fact that the Prime Minister's last statement has met with suspicion has a legitimate ground. Many people think that this statement is a simple repetition of what Turkey has been doing for years. In the past, Turkey had also put on a demeanor to make it appear as if it were changing certain things with regards to its denialist politics, specifically due to foreign pressures. The real purpose, however, was not to take steps towards change, but only to gain time or relieve the "nuisance" of outside pressure. Once the danger of increased pressure had been removed, the familiar position was once again resumed.

The most widely known example of this was the initiative known as TARC (Turkish Armenian Reconciliation Committee). As an attempt to prevent the French Parliament and the U.S. Congress to pass genocide bills within their own respective legislatures, Turkey launched the TARC initiative to demonstrate that they "have started negotiations with the Armenians." And now, in 2015, the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide is upon us. The argument that this last step by the Turkish government was intended to lessen the upcoming pressures in 2015 can be easily advanced, given Turkey's previous engagement in such tactics.

The real question should rather be: is this step only the beginning of progress for Turkey, or is this the only step Turkey is going to take with regards to 1915? For now, we do not know the answer. However, if we look at various declarations by government officials since Erdoğan's statement, the most prominent of which is Davutoğlu's piece in *The Guardian* on May 2, 2014, we can see that the government's general attitude seems to be "don't get pushy, this is as far as we go on the topic of 1915."

About the author:

Taner Akcam is a Turkish historian and sociologist, and the Chair of Armenian Genocide Studies at Clark University. He was imprisoned for political speech while still a university student in Ankara, and in 1976 was adopted as a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International. After receiving political asylum in Germany, he earned a PhD from the University of Hanover. Akcam is widely recognised as one of the first Turkish scholars to write extensively on the Ottoman-Turkish genocide of the Armenians in the early 20th century. He has published more than ten books on the Armenian genocide and Turkish nationalism, in several languages. These include *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (Metropolitan Books, 2006); *Judgment at Istanbul: The Armenian Genocide Trials*, co-written with Vahakn Dadrian (Berghahn Books, 2011); and *The Young Turks' Crime Against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton University Press, 2012), which won the MESA Albert Hourani Book Award for 2013 and was listed as one of the best books of 2012 on the Middle East by *Foreign Affairs*.