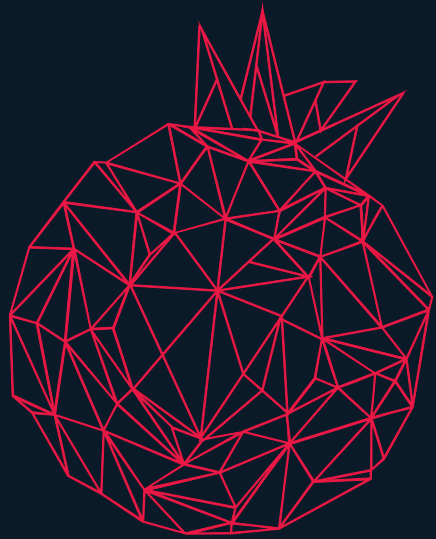
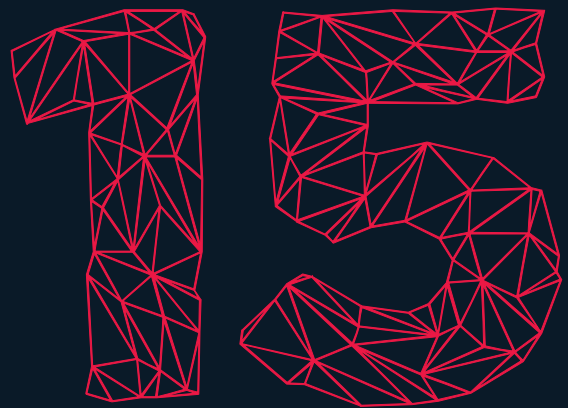


THE EVENTS OF 1915 AND THE TURKISH-ARMENIAN CONTROVERSY OVER HISTORY



I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE DISAGREEMENT

Despite centuries of cohabitation between the Turks and the Armenians, the events that took place during the First World War caused these two peoples to drift apart. The First World War was a calamity of unprecedented proportions. At least 16 million people lost their lives and another 20 million were wounded. The Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires collapsed, boundaries changed dramatically and mass migrations occurred.

As a matter of fact, the decline of the Ottoman Empire started before the First World War. The westerly winds of nationalism resulted in the Empire's significant loss of land especially in the Balkans and led to the further weakening of the Ottoman state structure. Nearly 4.5 million Muslim subjects of the Ottoman Empire perished between 1864 and 1922. Moreover, around 5 million Ottoman citizens were driven away from their ancestral homes in the Balkans and the Caucasus during the period of the Empire's disintegration and found shelter in Istanbul and Anatolia. During that period, all peoples that made up the Empire suffered. It is a fact that the Armenians went through painful events during those turbulent times and shared a common fate with the Empire.

As of the second half of the 19th century, the support given by some influential Armenian organisations to the policies of Czarist Russia aimed at weakening and dividing the Ottoman Empire was considered to be a major security concern. The separatist actions and revolts of these groups and their armed attacks in the areas with predominant Ottoman Muslim population escalated the threat. During the First World War, Armenian radical groups did not hesitate to join forces with the invading Russian army to create an ethnically homogenous Armenia.

“While the ARF program aspired to freedom and autonomy within the framework of the empire, the Hunchak program aspired to the complete separation and independence of Turkish Armenia. Consequently, these groups used different tactics to achieve their goals. For example, in order to quickly bring European attention to the Armenian Question, the Hunchaks staged mass demonstrations. Their most notable activities were the Kum Kapu demonstration of July 27, 1890; the placards (yafta) incident in Anatolia in 1893; and the Sassun Rebellion of August 1894 against the nomadic Kurdish tribes and government tax collectors. (Bedross Der Matossian, *Shattered Dreams of Revolution: From Liberty to Violence in the Late Ottoman Empire*, 2014 p.13.)”

In response, in 1915, the Ottoman Government decided that the Armenian population residing in the warzone or in the strategic areas nearby should be relocated to the southern Ottoman provinces away from the supply routes and transport lines of the advancing Russian Army. Some Armenians that resided away from the frontline but were reported or suspected of being involved in collaboration with the enemy were also included in this measure.

“...It is misleading to compare the appalling losses suffered by the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire with the destruction of Jews of the Nazi Germany... what happened to the Armenians is a result of their armed rebellion against the Turks that started long before the war and continued increasingly.”

Bernard Lewis, Notes on a Century: Reflections of a Middle East Historian, 2012

Whilst the Ottoman Government had planned for the protection and nourishment of the dislocated Armenians, their suffering could not be avoided under the circumstances of the time. Wartime conditions exacerbated by internal strife, local groups seeking retaliation, banditry, famine, epidemics and the general lawlessness of a disintegrating Empire all combined to produce a painful tragedy that was beyond any expected contingency.

Archive documents reveal that there were some Ottoman officials who committed offences against Armenian convoys contrary to their orders. They were held responsible for the Armenian losses and were punished in 1916 including with capital punishment.

With the de facto dissolution of the Ottoman Empire following the First World War, the constituent elements of the Empire fought the “War of Independence” and established the Republic of Turkey. In its struggle for life, this national movement that founded the Turkish Republic had to take on a war, especially between 1918 and 1920, with the Armenian rebels as well as with the occupying forces. While in 1923, as the successor of the Ottoman Empire, the victorious Turkish Republic was claiming its role in the world with the founding principle of “Peace at home, peace in the world”, it buried the pain of the loss of millions of lives of its children and many hundreds of thousands of square kilometres of land and focused on a future that was based on peace, tranquillity and amity.



II. INTRODUCTION OF THE EVENTS OF 1915 TO THE WORLD AGENDA

After almost half a century following the events of 1915, a new historiography movement was derived from the pain of the past. It is of significance that this movement aiming to narrate the events from the perspective of the Armenians and to popularise them internationally took shape in a bi-polar world order. During the 1960s with the initiative of Armenian population living in the USSR, the events of 1915 started to be introduced to the world agenda. This campaign against Turkey, who sided with the Western world during the Cold War and played a vital role in the security of the West, has been an important challenge and area of struggle.

III. RADICAL ARMENIAN GROUPS AND TERROR

The smear campaign that started within the USSR soon spread globally to Armenian groups, fuelled radicalism and caused violent acts against Turkey and Turkish identity. Painful for Turks to remember, Armenian terrorist groups conducted heinous attacks to draw worldwide attention to their claims. Thirty seven Turkish diplomats and family members were cruelly murdered by Armenian terrorists in perceived retaliation for the events of 1915.

IV. BUILDING THE “ARMENIAN NARRATIVE” CONCERNING THE EVENTS OF 1915

Once the terrorist groups attained their aim of propagating the claims of genocide and introducing them into the global agenda by terror, Armenian radicalism moved on to the next stage. The world now had an “Armenian Question” that evoked curiosity and was unexplored. Now it was the time to build a narrative/discourse based solely on emotive Armenian historical interpretation, on occasion with the use of forged documents/photographs. In order to support this narrative, highly questionable methodology and exaggerated or dubious memoirs were also used.

The injudicious and extralegal use of the word “Denial”

The Armenian narrative defines the events of 1915 a priori as a “genocide” by putting the historical background and the concrete facts aside and also by completely ignoring the legal aspect. The narrative that revolves around genocide, this “magical” word, gives both visibility to the Armenian thesis and also immunity/incontestability by almost canonising the case.

Then again, in this way, by creating a cumbersome feeling of victimisation; human emotions are exploited. Adopting the Armenian narrative is imposed as being politically correct, and any opposing approach is branded as “denial” and is suppressed by criminalisation. Where-

as, in its nature a claim can be questioned yet not “denied”. The word “denial” is used intentionally to prevent opposing discourse and consequently a debate.

The Armenian diaspora, abiding by this tactic, with the help of its influential citizens living in Western countries, published countless documents centring on the Armenian discourse and managed to present the 1915 events to the global audience from their one-sided view. Many of these publications are in fact different versions of a few questionable main sources.

At this point it should not be forgotten that the “genocide thesis” is a “supra-identity” integrating Armenians from all around the world. However, this is a “negative identity formation” and it does not create a positive impact for Armenians while isolating Armenia from the rest of the world.

“Many of the descendants of the victims of the events of 1915 and the following years – especially those in the Armenian diaspora – construct that identity around the perception that their community has been the victim of genocide.”
European Court of Human Rights, Case of Perinçek vs. Switzerland Grand Chamber Judgment, 15.10.2015, para.156.

For some third party countries the “genocide thesis”, depending on the state of political relations, could be used as a foreign policy tool against Turkey.



It is not possible to deny the suffering of the Ottoman Armenians.

All our evaluations aspire to drawing attention to the unfounded nature of the genocide thesis.

No one can deny that Armenians suffered terribly and many lost their lives. The deaths of millions of Ottoman Muslims in the same era, so often ignored in Western historiography does not constitute a reason for condoning or belittling the deaths of Armenians. “Fire burns the place where it falls”.

However, insisting on genocide as the only way to define the events of 1915 by ignoring historical facts, the war-time conditions and the law is an inappropriate way to honour the memory of lives lost. It also prevents Turks and Armenians from getting together to reconcile.

“...The three pillars of the Armenian claim to classify World War I deaths as genocide fail to substantiate the charge that the Young Turk regime intentionally organized the massacres ...”
(Guenter Lewy, *Revisiting the Armenian Genocide, Middle East Quarterly, Fall 2005, p. 3-12*)

No political, scientific or legal consensus to describe the events of 1915. The issue is a matter of legitimate debate.

“[Doğu Perinçek on his statements in dispute], that the Court has, already accepted as relating to an issue of public concern (...), and described as a “heated debate, not only within Turkey but also in the international arena”
European Court of Human Rights, Case of Perinçek vs. Switzerland Grand Chamber Judgment, 15.10.2015, para.231.

To accept Armenian views unequivocally, in order to demonstrate solidarity with this group that has experienced past suffering, ignores the grievances that were experienced by other nations and demonises Turks unfairly.

The decisions of recognition of genocide by various Parliaments are mere reflections of daily political will, and are not legally binding.

Armenian communities living in Western countries are often represented by very well-organised nationalist associations that have chosen to build an Armenian identity fixated on having the events of 1915 internationally recognised as genocide. Consequently, they could form a public perception as if the Armenian narrative is widely accepted or even adopted by a consensus. A series of aggressive public relations campaigns are the reason that this perception is wide-spread. However, **there is no “political consensus” on this issue.**

The fact that approximately 25 out of 200 national legislatures motivated by the international conjecture took decisions mostly of a non-binding nature, in support of the Armenian narrative is not of much importance. It is

evident that these decisions were partly fait accompli, that there were also numerous parliamentarians who voted against the Armenian narrative and that the issue was approached without understanding the entirety of this complicated historical issue and with convictions, preconceptions and religious justifications.

For instance, a draft to recognise the events of 1915 as genocide had been rejected by 245 votes to 37 in 2008 in the Swedish Parliament. Then, in two years’ time, in 2010 a draft with similar content was passed with 151 votes against 150. What could be the new historical evidence that would cause the Swedish Parliament to change its position? The case of Sweden openly shows the variability and the inconsistency of such decisions.

“The real judge is the people and their conscience. And in my conscience, the conscience of no state authority could ever match the conscience of a people. My only wish is to talk freely about our shared past with my beloved friends here in Turkey –in the most comprehensive manner, and without extracting animosity from that past...”
Hrant Dink, 1 November 2004.



There Is No Academic Consensus on the Events of 1915 Either.

Along with scholars defending the Armenian claims, there are many others who do not subscribe to the genocide thesis. While recognising the suffering of the Armenians, they argue that the events of 1915 cannot be described as genocide on the basis of a comprehensive account on what had happened.

“In any event, it is even doubtful that there can be a “general consensus”, particularly among academics, about events such as those in issue in the present case, given that historical research is by definition subject to controversy and dispute and does not really lend itself to definitive conclusions or the assertion of objective and absolute truths”
European Court of Human Rights, Case of Perinçek vs. Switzerland Second Section Judgment, 17.12.2013, para.117.

V. LEGAL DIMENSION OF THE EVENTS OF 1915

Probably, utmost attention should be paid to the ignorance of the legal dimension of the issue. Genocide denotes a clearly defined crime in international law. It was first described in the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide. Events that took place before the implementation date of the said Convention do not fall within its jurisdiction.

“The Court considers that ... the Convention is not retroactive. The Court thus concludes that the substantive provisions of the Convention do not impose upon a State obligations in relation to acts said to have occurred before that State became bound by the Convention.”
International Court of Justice, Case Concerning Application of the Convention on the Prevention of the Crime of Genocide, Croatia v. Serbia, 3.2.2015, para.99-100

Furthermore, for any case to qualify as a genocide, the existence of specific conditions stipulated in the 1948 Genocide Convention should be proved unequivocally with direct evidence. Defining the events of 1915 on the basis of preconceptions and opinions is simply disregarding the law. This is neither understandable nor acceptable.

“...for the crime of genocide to be made out, it is not sufficient for the members of a particular group to be targeted because they belong to that group, but the acts in question must at the same time be perpetrated with intent to destroy the group as such in whole or in part (dolus specialis). Genocide is therefore a very narrow legal concept which, moreover, is difficult to prove. The Court is not satisfied that the “general consensus” to which the Swiss courts referred as a basis for the applicant’s conviction can be relied on in relation to these very specific points of law.”

European Court of Human Rights, Case of Perinçek vs. Switzerland Second Section Judgment, 17.12.2013, para.116.

There is no judgment of a competent court making an assessment of genocide with regard to the events of 1915.

Only a competent international court could make an assessment of genocide. As genocide is a serious claim, the owner of such a claim should prove its existence with concrete evidence specifically regarding the presence of an intent. As in the case of the Holocaust and the genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica, only an international court with expertise could assess the existence of this crime. In this regard, defining the events of 1915 as genocide is against the law.

The events of 1915 cannot be compared to the Holocaust either. These two cases are distinct both legally and historically. They also have different repercussions for today.

“In this connection, a clear distinction can be made between the present case and cases concerning denial of crimes relating to the Holocaust (...)their denial concerned crimes perpetrated by the Nazi regime (...) had resulted in convictions with a clear legal basis(...) the historical facts challenged by the applicants in those cases had been found by an international court to be clearly established.(...) The Court shares the opinion of the Turkish government, according to which the denial of the Holocaust is today the main driving force of anti-Semitism. In fact, it judges that this is still a current phenomenon, and against which the international community must be firm and vigilant. One cannot affirm that the dismissal of the description of “genocide” for the tragic events that occurred in 1915 and the following years might have the same repercussions.”
European Court of Human Rights, Case of Perinçek vs. Switzerland Second Section Judgment, 17.12.2013, para.117 and para.119.



VI. RE-BUILDING HISTORICAL FRIENDSHIP AND COOPERATION

Turks and Armenians should work to rebuild their historical friendship without forgetting the difficult periods in their common past. It cannot be considered normal for a century old event to take hostage the present and future of two neighbourly and close peoples to such an extent. Today, not many people remember the fact that Armenians and Turks had very close social relations wherever they were up until the assassinations of the Turkish diplomats by Armenian terrorist organisations and the subsequent genocide propaganda.

In order to reinstate such an affinity, there is a need for a dialogue process, respect for different views and efforts to instil empathy. This is how a path for abridging the Turkish and Armenian discourses on the basis of “a just memory” could emerge.

Believing that this is possible, Turkey proposed the establishment of a joint historical commission composed of Turkish and Armenian historians, and other international experts, to study the events of 1915 in the archives of Turkey, Armenia and third countries. The findings of the commission might bring about a fuller and fairer understanding of this tragic period on both sides and contribute to normalisation between Turks and Armenians.

There is a separate need for establishing a constructive discourse in line with the spirit of the age that will eliminate prejudices and dismantle the preconceptions of the culture of conflict with a view to focus on the future.

President Erdoğan’s message of condolences was issued with such conviction on 23 April 2014, during his term as Prime Minister, and it was an important milestone. The message centred on the respect for the lives lost in the events of 1915, prescribed focusing on the future while studying the historical facts on the basis of a just memory, emphasised the importance of staying away from offending narratives and approaching different views with empathy. Similar messages by Prime Minister Professor Ahmet Davutoğlu on the occasion of the commemoration of Hrant Dink on 20 January 2015 and for the Ottoman Armenians who lost their lives during the final years of the Empire on 20 April 2015 demonstrate that Turkey has internalised this discourse.

“It is our hope and belief that the peoples of an ancient and unique geography, who share similar customs and manners will be able to talk to each other about the past with maturity and to remember together their losses in a decent manner. And it is with this hope and belief that we wish that the Armenians who lost their lives in the context of the early twentieth century rest in peace, and we convey our condolences to their grandchildren.”
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 23 April 2014

Turkey continues with this sincere discourse and takes further steps to give it a further meaning. In this respect, cherishing the memory of the Ottoman Armeni-

ans and protecting the Armenian cultural heritage is a primary aim. During the liturgy in memory of the lives lost in 1915 organised by the Armenian Patriarchate of İstanbul on 24 April 2015, the Republic of Turkey, for the first time, was represented at ministerial level.

“Let me reiterate that we are cognisant of the sorrowful events experienced in the past by the Armenian community and that I sincerely share your pain. Please rest assured also that our hearts remain wide open to the grandchildren of the Ottoman Armenians all around the world.”
Message sent by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to the Liturgy in the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul, 24 Nisan 2015

It is discouraging to see that those steps taken for friendship and normalisation have not been reciprocated by Armenia so far.

In the final analysis, the only approach befitting this era would be facilitating ways for reconciliation, putting focus sincerely and humanely on to the future and replacing feelings of hatred and revenge embedded in the minds and hearts of young generations with concepts of mutual understanding and empathy.

“There is every reason to believe that these two ancient nations can demonstrate the wisdom to understand each other and contemplate a future together. Having shared the same geography and a long history, it is only Turks and Armenians who can effectively address their issues together and work jointly to find ways forward.”
From the Statement of Professor Ahmet Davutoğlu on the Commemoration of Hrant Dink, 20 January 2015

“Recent years have shown that nothing can be achieved by trying to impose conflicting narratives upon one another. To reach the truth, it is sufficient to attain a just memory, empathy, respectful language and a reasonable and objective perspective. As descendants of two ancient peoples who a hundred years ago shared the same destiny whether in joy or in sorrow, our common responsibility and calling today is to heal century old wounds and re-establish our human ties once again.”
From the Statement of Professor Ahmet Davutoğlu on the Ottoman Armenians Who Lost Their Lives During the Final Years of the Ottoman Empire, 20 April 2015