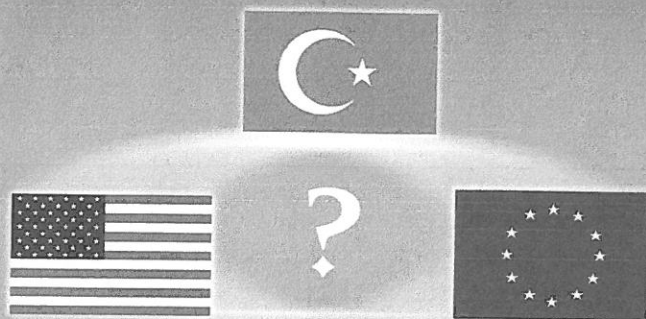


# INSIGHT TURKEY

Quarterly research and information journal focusing on Turkey



## Turkey's Western vocation: strategies for the 21st century

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Reimagining the past, rethinking the present:  
the future of Turkish-Armenian relations

by Gerard J. Libaridian\*

In March of this year, a group of scholars met in Chicago to discuss "Armenians and the end of the Ottoman Empire." Co-organised by Ron Suny of the University of Chicago and Müge Göçek of the University of Michigan, the workshop brought together a number of prominent scholars, including Engin Akarlı, Taner Akçam, Aram Arkun, Kevork Bardakjian, Halil Berktaş, Selim Deringil, Geoffry Eley, Çağlar Keyder, Rashid Khalidi, Gerard Libaridian and Robert Melson.

The professional comradeship of scholars informed the tone of the debate and the exchange at the two day event. Participants were there to partake in a collective pursuit to understand what had happened at a particular time and place, rather to persuade others of some preconceived judgment, or to represent national positions. On a politically charged and clearly divisive issues such as this one, the scholarly exchange of true academics – and not propagandists – should be a welcome initiative to all parties interested in solutions, rather than problems. The Chicago workshop was intended to be the first in a series of scholarly meetings that continues to address the issue.

The following paper was delivered by Dr Gerard J. Libaridian at the Chicago workshop and was hailed by the workshop participants as central and tone-setting.

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Although we came to the crossroads of history  
leaderless and without a plan  
with the fires of others illuminating  
our dark unlit roads,  
we are here.

Here risen from your dreamless sleep  
we curse your dark weakness,  
you insignificant builders of our past,  
you heroes without talent.

And, standing here facing tomorrow,  
strangely light, extraordinarily faceless  
naked as nakedness, and without a past.

The path has been the path of vanity and death  
and we will not venerate you,  
wretched ancestors, ancient leaders  
faceless history!

On this many coloured planet,  
from the beginning until the end,  
we are the first nation unable  
to betray our history, even if we wanted to.

**Yeghishé Charents**

Armenian poet born in Kars,  
lived in Soviet Armenia, killed by Stalin's henchmen in 1936 (?).  
Segment from the poem "At the Crossroads", 1933,  
translation by Diana Der Hovanesian and Marzbed Margossian,  
with minor changes by the author of the paper.

We all realise, I believe, that we are undertaking a difficult journey. We are participants in an initiative that is far more significant than an academic exercise. We will be looking at a problem that has the dubious distinction of being emotionally wrenching, politically explosive and while intellectually challenging. The topic has something to do with the collective memory, identity, and destiny of two peoples that have grown up damning each other, but are condemned to live together, whether in their homelands or as *diaspora* communities sharing citizenship in new countries in Europe and the Americas.

We are asked to examine a topic that relates to the foundations as well as to the present and future relations of two states which, though neighbours, grew further apart with time.

**In the first place, we should identify the areas of disagreement between "Turks and Armenians," admittedly a very vague terminology...**

The reasons for these paradoxes are many. They relate not only to what happened before and during 1915, but also what all of us have made of what happened, the role we have assigned to those events in our identity, politics, and in the way we relate to the rest of the world.

Understandably, the goal of the workshop is modest and tentative, expectations cautious. So much unloading, unburdening, stripping and decoding must be done before we can tackle the question as to Who did What to Whom in the Ottoman Empire during WWI, or what to call the tragedy that transpired.

Much valuable work has been done on this period, yet the historiography is not adequate to address the delicate issues we are confronting. While some intelligent and intelligible discourse has begun to emerge during the last decade or so, some of what has been written has tended to obscure rather than illuminate, to create a web of beliefs and political positions rather than disentangle and enlighten.

I would like to contribute to this workshop by asking three sets of questions which, in my opinion, the existing literature has not probed directly and sufficiently. I will be gratified if these prove to be the right questions and if these stimulate further discussion and research. The first question is, what is the problem we are dealing with? Secondly, whose problem is it? Thirdly, what have we done with the problem, or why is it that in some cases the

problem has been internalised in a manner that almost ensures that it is not resolved?

### **What is the problem?**

In the first place, we should identify the areas of disagreement between "Turks and Armenians," admittedly a very vague terminology, but one which foretells the character and depth of the problem as it best represents the generally held perception of the issue.

Is the problem one of accounting for history –the nature of the policies and actions of the Ottoman government and/or of the Armenian leadership? Are the numbers of those killed the issue? Is intentionality the problem? Is it a matter characterising what happened or the name we give to it? Would archival, historical or logical evidence make a difference in what we call these events? What would it take to agree on or change labels such as "unfortunate events," "civil war," "deportations and massacres" or

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"tragedy," to "genocide?" What could we do, for example, with the argument made privately by a high official of the Turkish government, that since the Armenians of Istanbul were not subjected to the same measures as those in the rest of Turkey, the events of 1915 could not be characterised as genocide? Would a cogent legal and logical argument – that to be recognised as genocide, not all members of a group have to be victimized – be sufficient to change his position? And would a change in his thinking make a difference on official Turkish policy regarding the denial of the genocide?

Had there been agreement on the genocidal character of Ottoman policies, would it matter if we found a good reason for these policies? And if such policies were justified, would such justification make it less of a genocide?

In other words, are we facing a problem of scholarship or of terminology that could be resolved through a sustained and possibly joint scholarly and intellectual effort? Or are we dealing with other factors, such as vested political interests vital enough or fears deep enough to override all other considerations?

Each of these factors is relevant. At the end of the next couple of days we might very well start thinking of a joint effort. Yet, to give any effort a chance for success, we must begin with the larger, conceptual problem we are facing. We must begin by first re-placing the events of WWI in history, for, the dominant discourse on the subject has been anti-historical. Though armed with facts and arguments, writers for the most part have taken those events out of the chain of complex human relations that constitute history. (I

**The dominant paradigm of two nationalisms in collision takes too much for granted and reinforces the “two history” approach.**

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am not referring here to the problem of contextualisation, but rather first to treating events historically and not ahistorically.)

Worse yet, the discourse has been mutually unintelligible to those engaged in writing on the subject, because we are not dealing just with opposing views of a history – even when we are being historical. The discourse has consisted of two histories, as if separate and unrelated. We have written almost isolated histories of two peoples that, one would think, crossed each other’s path in 1915, each performing the predetermined and inescapable role which their characters mandated: one, of the victim; the other, that of the victimizer. A debate on the victim-victimizer paradigm is, at best, a debate on morality – necessary in and by itself – but it is not a historical debate. Even as a debate on morality, this one is distorted, as it tends to justify some otherwise questionable actions on both sides during the last century in the name of an absolute value or end.

The dominant paradigm of two nationalisms in collision takes too much for granted and reinforces the “two history” approach. It seems to me our common past – for it is a common past, whatever differences that existed and whatever the consequences of these differences – has been hijacked and our inescapably interwoven history – however heroic, criminal or tragic – has been held hostage by those who have accepted the nation-state model and nationalism as absolute values. At a time when the notion of sovereign state itself is in question, there are some who still insist on the nation-state concept both as the purpose and end result of the inexorable march of history.

Is it possible to understand history under those circumstances? Would it be, in fact, history or some sort of factionalised narrative, when our under-

standing of the past is based on our perception of our own realities, created after – and to some extent as a result of – the events of WWI? I once remarked to a professor that on occasion historians seem to act like failed gods: they recreate the past in their own image, once they realise they cannot do so with the future. It seems to me that we should begin by questioning the ideological underpinnings of history as it is written today. The problem begins there.

### **Whose problem is it?**

Since there is a problem with our reading and writing of history, then the next question would be, whose problem is it? The dominant perspectives assume that a description of the events constitutes, in and by itself, the explanation of these events. The more detailed the description of cruelties, some Armenian authors believe, the more convincing the case for a genocide and as to why it must have happened. For accountants of history, the implication is that Turks killed

**There seems to be less disagreement on the consequences of what happened.**

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because it is their nature to do so, and it is the manifestation of that evil nature that must be highlighted. Turkish writers in this category have a more difficult task: they cannot describe a non-event. However, they can hope to dissipate serious transgressions, especially in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire, in idealised descriptions of the Ottoman administrative genius and spirit of tolerance and in repetitions of a listing of vile Armenian intentions and fifth column activities. Such stories make the Ottoman Empire the first in history to have been established and maintained strictly through humanitarian policies.

Anti-Armenian accounts can, furthermore, talk of the wealth and important positions some Armenians had in the Ottoman Empire, which would deny any credible motive for a genocide policy and simultaneously imply a justification for whatever “atrocities” were committed.

There seems to be less disagreement on the consequences of what happened. For Armenians, it was the end of their collective existence on land that was their home from time immemorial. For Turkey, the problem caused by Armenians, however defined, was resolved. One way to avoid the abstractions which nationalist perspectives must inevitably make of real people is to look at whole patterns of relations between peoples, leaders,

and decision-makers. That is, instead of treating individuals who made decisions as the mere executors of the sacrosanct, abstracted ideas of nation and nationalism, we might want to have a second look and ask, why did it happen? or, how did it come to happen? For, between the narratives, the diatribes and the mourning, we are missing the discourse on the cause or causes of a very historical event.

The difference between history, on the one hand and collective memory or narrative, on the other, is in the ability of the first to make sense of a series of events, to explain as many disparate facts as possible, to understand as many decisions as discernible in human terms. History requires such a standard, even if facts and events relate to decisions that might otherwise be considered inhuman; so inhuman, in fact, that one may not want to resist the temptation to discard the causal dimension, if for no other reason than to reconfirm or show one's own humanity. Yet we know that such events have taken place and are taking place often enough that genocides can no longer be cast outside the realm of history.

A past event then becomes part of history when it is given a credible explanation, an explanation that also can account for more than itself, when it can survive the challenge which seemingly contrary facts and phenomena preceding it and accompanying it would pose. We could not claim to write the history of that period without accounting for the whole range of relations and problems confronting those who made decisions for the Ottoman state and for its Armenian subjects. That, in turn, is possible only when we rethink the past, in fact when we reimagine it, hopefully together, without the constraints which ideological thinking and the politics of genocide recognition have imposed on our understanding of that past.

Is it possible for Turkish and Armenian historians, for example, to imagine the history of the 1878-1914 period by suspending knowledge of subsequent events? Is it possible to think of relations between Turks and Armenians without taking the genocide as that event to which all history was leading and which determined all subsequent relations? Was genocide inevitable, could it have been avoided? Is it possible to think of the establishment and history of the Republic of Turkey while making the genocide part of its inheritance from the Ottoman Empire? Is it possible for Turkish historians to think of Ottoman history while avoiding looking at the Turkish Republic as a pre-ordained outcome? Is it possible for Armenian historians to imagine the history of Armenian decision-making and policies as part of

what happened before and during 1915? Can we imagine the thinking process of those who made decisions before they made the decisions? Was it possible, for example, that the behaviour of Armenian leaders did little to account for the Young Turk mentality? Is it possible that a more resolute and systematic policy of resistance would have reduced, at least, the scope of the calamity? What did Young Turk leaders see when they were talking to Armenian representatives, and *vice versa*?

I would like to contribute to this process with interpretations of a few aspects of that history. First, Turkish-Armenian relations are not merely a problem of relations between Turks and Armenians. Rather, they are Turkish-Armenian-Great Power relations. There are, in fact, three sets of players, not two, whether one is trying to understand history, politics, or wishing to assign responsibility. The role of the Great Powers, i.e., imperialist powers, individually and collectively, is integral to the processes we are trying to understand.

Second, each set of players represents a different entity. One player, the Ottoman Empire, is a state, or rather, a political elite – now fully motivated by a peculiar kind of Turkish nationalism – that is speaking and acting in the name of a state. That elite has at its disposal all that a state can provide, including subjects who can kill and deport and be killed and be deported upon the orders of the state as represented by the political elite. The second player, the Armenians, are a people, one of the subject groups in that state, with different centres of power claiming to speak and/or act on its behalf. The third player, the so-called Great Powers, constitute a group of states – for that period, super-states – that are in competition, but collectively determine the rules of the game, a game in which others that are engaged wittingly or unwittingly can only try to cope with. Naturally, the study of the functioning and role of such different entities cannot be uniform in approach, beginning with the character and location of archival materials extant for each.

Third, each of the three players has a dual identity or role in the larger scheme of things.

Let us take first the Ottoman state. On the one hand it is an empire, ruling over peoples, territories and former kingdoms, regressive and repres-

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sive, especially at the end of its existence. On the other hand, the Ottoman Empire is also a victim of Western imperialism, of states that are bent upon carving it away and dominating as much of its territory as possible and exacting a high price for allowing the Ottoman state to play the game and survive.

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Second, we have the Great Powers. On the one hand, they are states whose domestic, political and intellectual culture constitutes the source of inspiration for the political aspirations of others for individual and collective freedoms and rights. They produced, after all, the enlightenment, democracy, socialism, and the scientific revolution. They also represent models of state building. On the other hand, these are states with superior military technology that they use to the detriment of smaller nations and aged empires, including the Ottoman.

Then we have the Armenians. On the one hand, they are predominantly peasants, farmers, craftsmen and traders, impoverished by over-taxation and extra-judicial exactions, paying the cost of the Ottoman debt, with an ever-weakening economic base of family and community existence, losing markets for home industries to Western industrial products. These are the Armenians of the eastern provinces and central Anatolia, whose interests more often than not clashed with those of the privileged ones, largely in Istanbul.

On the other hand, the grievances of these same Armenians are articulated increasingly by a liberal and then radical intelligentsia, largely European educated Ottoman Armenians and later still more radical Russian Armenians. Armenians project themselves as the vanguards of Western enlightenment, bringing to bear ideas of individual freedoms and formulating populist aims. At the same time, however, the tactical purpose of popular agitation followed by guerrilla warfare is to secure the intervention of the Great Powers in the affairs of the Ottoman state. This confounds the two characters of the great powers – enlightenment and imperialism – which the Turkish political elite considers to be the mechanism that victimized the Ottoman state in the name of reforms.

We thus come full circle. The problem for the Turkish elite was how to deal with the challenge of the Great Powers; how to ensure the survival of

a strong state (if not Ottoman, then at least Turkish). The question was whether to do it through reforms or repression. Reforms did not result in neutralising Western or, by this time, Balkan appetite for expansionism. The problem for Armenians was how to achieve reforms: through rebellion, Great Power intervention, or both. For the Turkish elite, that placed Armenians on the side of the victimizer, the enemy. While the military capabilities of this enemy served as a role model for the leaders of the Ottoman Empire, it gave Armenians nothing but false hopes.

The history Armenians write is the story of their own victimization, in which the genocide constitutes the ultimate repression. The history written by Turks is that of Turkish liberation from Great Power imperialism. Both histories are based on victimization and liberation. The difference is that the first ended tragically, the second more successfully. The history Armenians write ignores the role they played in the hands of the Great Powers to weaken the Ottoman state, as seen by those obsessed with the survival of a strong empire or a strong state. The history written by Turks ignores the social, economic, and political problem Armenians had: for Young Turks Armenians were the problem, they could not have one. One history is written to come to terms with defeat and find something redeeming in being a victim, the other to justify success by celebrating the state. At the end, what Armenians considered reforms the Turkish elite considered an attempt to weaken Turkey. But that is not all.

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What did the Turkish elite consider a "strong" state? Where did Armenians fit in that scheme, or did they fit in at all? The Armenian reform movement or revolution was, in fact, a rebellion of peasants, artisans, and intellectuals, articulated in the terminology of contemporary European liberal and socialistic thinking. The Young Turk coup d'etat of 1909 had put an end to the experiment of democracy and power sharing. Europe appeared as a hypocrite whose designs had little to do with the kind of treatment Christians had. Democracy was seen as the Trojan horse that would destroy Turkey. Yet the Armenian parties constituted the only popularly based political force that still believed in and insisted on a parliament and a liberal political agenda. In this sense, Armenians constituted the left wing of the Ottoman political spectrum. By 1911, Armenians were the last element in Ottoman Turkey

to insist on a liberal democracy, a parliament that was representative and, most of all, on land reforms. The Armenian reform movement was the only one in the Ottoman Empire that touched on the social and economic as well political identity of the state.

During the last negotiations between the Armenian Revolutionary Federation ("*Dashnaktsutiune*," or ARF) and the Young Turk leaders from 1909-1911, the latter refused to give a positive response to a series of ARF demands. The ARF then presented what it considered its bottom line, its most critical demand. This was neither independence, nor autonomy, but rather agrarian reform in the Armenian populated provinces, if such was not acceptable to the Young Turks for the whole of the empire.

Yet agrarian reform would not only have undermined the social base of the Young Turks – a nascent Turkish bourgeoisie, bureaucrats and intellectuals and the Kurdish land-owning caste – but also directly contradicted the Young Turk vision of a future "strong" state. Agrarian reforms were seen as part of the kind of liberal agenda that had produced and would preserve a "weak" state. Beyond the general distaste for such an undertaking, land reform would strengthen the most politicised, non-Turkish element in Ottoman society. As the element in Ottoman society that had most readily internalised the reform agenda, Armenians constituted the virus, the disease that had to be removed surgically from the Turkish body politic. Furthermore, the removal of the whole was necessary not only to preserve the Turkish character of the state, but also the particular definition which Young Turk leaders understood by that term. The consequences of the elimination of the Armenian element on the character of the Turkish state and on the state of Turkish historiography are tremendous.

The problem of the genocide is not just a matter of human rights and wrongs, but also one that has affected the development of Turkish politics and the Turkish state.

As the ultimate form of repression, it is not just an Armenian problem; it is as much a problem of and in Turkish history. Of course, it is or should be a problem for the Great Powers then and their successors and equivalents today. If one were to substitute "reforms" with "human rights," "nation-state formation" with "territorial integrity," one may appreciate an important dimension of repeat performances of genocides.

### **The politics of genocide recognition**

A generation or two after the events, surviving Armenians had recovered

sufficiently to look at what had been done from a wider perspective than the individual, family, and communal losses and tragedies. The terms “massacres” and “deportations” reflected what individuals had witnessed and lived, what they knew happened to the people in their own communities, villages, and towns. While they knew the Ottoman actions were widespread even before the war had ended, the anger felt by the survivors was largely interjected. They were too busy coming to terms with their own personal fates and creating new lives, new families, and new communities, if such is possible after death.

The collective memory of what had happened and how it had happened remained very much part of the lives of the new generations. However, it was not until the beginning of the 1950s that Armenians, now fully conscious of the impact of the amplitude and historic significance of these massacres and deportations, were able and willing to give this memory a political articulation.

The Genocide then became an important, if not the most important, dimension of the collective and political identity of most Armenians.

Political parties articulated the need for the recognition of the Genocide in their programmes in the 1960s, with the full support of church, compatriot, educational and other community organisations in the diaspora. The failure of “politicisation” to secure recognition was followed by the emergence of groups that used assassinations and bombings against Turkish targets - - diplomats, consulates and embassies – from 1975-1983.

The response of the Turkish state from the start was denial. The more Armenians co-ordinated their actions, for the most part peacefully, the more systematic became the Turkish denial. Given state control over the media and academic institutions, there were, for a long time, no dissenters in Turkey or in the Turkish diaspora from the official position. Young Turks in Europe or in the US had internalised the government’s position and were as adamant about denial as young Armenians were about the factuality of the genocide and the necessity of recognition -- followed, for many, by reparations. There was neither room nor a forum for discussion. At the same time, continuing non-recognition of the genocide by Turkey constituted a rejection of the identity of the new generations.

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**There are a number of factors that contributed to this non-dialogue.**

On the Armenian side, the discourse was coarse and indiscriminate. It accused all Turks, past and present, of being party to the criminal action. It was, or appeared to be, a battle of all Armenians against all Turks. Given the state-induced ignorance on these events, the only way a Turk could counter the accusation for a crime he or she knew little or nothing about was to deny the crime itself. Recognition by a Turk would be tantamount to betrayal of Turkish identity and treason toward the Turkish nation. The Armenian discourse seemed to find more gratification in an anti-Turkish attitude than in any serious attempt to reach out and understand the roots of denial. It also made it almost impossible for Armenians to look at the past critically. The discourse legitimised a kind of orthodoxy regarding the past and present that discouraged critical thinking.

Secondly, the discourse quickly turned into a rejection of the Turkish state itself. Anti-Turkey and anti-Turkish activities in the diaspora became natural extensions of the genocide recognition campaign. The policy of denial of the genocide was seen as the mere manifestation of the evil nature of Turkey and of Turks. Very soon the genocide occupied a central dimension of diaspora identity and was transformed into an organising principle. This, in turn, justified in the eyes of the Turkish state the anti-Armenian character of genocide denial. The Turkish state thought duty bound to interpret the principles espoused by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk for the establishment of the new Turkish state as mandating the rewriting of history, ultimately in a manner that questioned the very existence of an Armenian nation or an Armenian state in history. Official Turkish treatment of events related to Armenians and others in Turkey since the establishment of the Republic fares no better. It precludes a dignified and intelligent dialogue.

Thirdly, Armenian political parties considered a Turkish recognition of the genocide as the first step and the legal basis for territorial demands from Turkey. Even if there were no other reasons, this linkage would have been sufficient for the Turkish state to deny the genocide at any cost.

Fourthly, the actions of armed Armenian groups against Turkish diplomats and institutions were seen by the Turkish state as real and direct threats to the security of the state. The Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide engaged in violent acts as tactical operations to compel

recognition of the genocide. The Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia, ASALA, considered theirs a strategy to liberate territories occupied by Turkey as a result of the genocide. Regardless, Turkey could not even consider recognition of the genocide under such circumstances. In fact, Turkey hardened its position, placing these actions, along with most of the international community, in the context of international terrorism. It seems to me also that many senior officials of the Turkish government were friends and colleagues of those who were killed or wounded as a result of Armenian actions and they themselves were targets. For them, any recognition of the genocide today would be tantamount to a betrayal of the memory of those who were killed and a reward for actions against the state.

**...European states often used the Armenian genocide and the Kurdish issue as excuses to couch the religious/ethnic bias...**

Fifthly, the Armenian campaign for the recognition of the genocide sought the support of Western countries as a form of pressure on the Turkish state rather than as a form of accepting their own responsibility in the affair. For Turkish leaders overly sensitised to the role of the Great Powers in the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire and the use of reforms in the Armenian provinces to extract concessions and weaken the state, such a campaign seemed like a repetition of a part of history they knew and accepted. For example, European states often used the Armenian genocide and the Kurdish issue as excuses to couch the religious/ethnic bias underlying their objection to Turkey's joining the European Community or Union.

Finally, seen from the perspective of the last half-century, the genocide became the prism through which the political attitudes of the diaspora were changed from anti-Sovietism and anti-communism to anti-Turkism. The political agenda had focused for the most part on achieving independence for Soviet Armenia. Beginning in the 1970s, the annexation of Eastern Turkey's formerly Armenian populated provinces by Soviet Armenia became the paramount goal. The reasons for this shift are complex and will not be discussed here.

Regardless of the style, form or content of the Armenian campaign, the ideology of the Turkish state and the official history of state formation would have made it very difficult to place an event such as a genocide at the time and place of its genesis. Even with the distaste and ambivalence which

Republican Turkey felt toward the Young Turks, it is significant that those Young Turks most responsible for the Genocide – Talat and Enver Pasha – have been the first to be rehabilitated by having boulevards named after them in Turkish cities and their remains repatriated for official interment in Turkey.

Turkish foreign policy seems to be traumatized with what has been labelled the “Sèvres Treaty syndrome,” or a healthy “obsession” as a former

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Minister of Foreign Affairs labelled it. Any recognition of the genocide would require revising, critically revising, official history, which may also imply debunking the fear of new partitions of Turkish homeland.

Just as for Armenians the campaign for recognition, directed through Europe and the US, has become an organising principle in the diaspora, for Turkish governments the Sèvres syndrome is an organising principle that provides some direction, or the appearance of coherence, to Turkey’s difficult relations with many of its neighbours, or

even a cover for the continuing maintenance of a “national security” based environment in domestic affairs. The denial of the genocide to avoid Armenian territorial demands – a particular manifestation of the larger syndrome – seems to have become an essential ingredient for the rationalisation of the deeper fear, whether rational or not.

It does appear that some, on both sides, value the problem more than a solution. It may also be that the extremes need and sustain each other.

**Turkish-Armenian relations: old or new?**

It is most significant that with the independence of Armenia, for the first time in living memory we have started talking of the genocide issue in the context of Turkish-Armenian state relations, rather than of Turkish-Armenian relations in the context of the genocide and its recognition.

Independence and the centrality of the genocide issue to the Armenian discourse – largely in the diaspora but also for some forces in Armenia – collided at the genesis of independent Armenia. One consequence of the shift from anti-communism to anti-Turkism was that an important segment of the diaspora lived through some moments of anxiety and some were even

antagonistic to the decision of the citizens of Soviet Armenia to secede from the Soviet Union and make Armenia an independent state. Armenia could not defend itself, it was argued, against an unreformed Turkey that would certainly attack an independent Armenia and kill the rest of the Armenians. Similarly, anti-independence, i.e., pro-Moscow, forces attempted to derail the independence movement by raising the spectre of new genocides and Pan-Turkism.

Meanwhile, the leadership of the Armenian National Movement supporting independence had reached the conclusion that an independent Armenia could exist, relations with Turkey could and should be normalised, and that neither the genocide nor its recognition would constitute the basis for Armenia's foreign policy and relations with Turkey. Armenia voted overwhelmingly for independence in a general referendum in September 1991. The collapse of the USSR accelerated the recognition by the international community of the independence of all former Soviet republics, including Armenia.

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Oddly enough, it was Turkey that introduced the subject of the genocide in Turkish-Armenian relations in the post-independence period. Turkey recognised the independence of Armenia in early 1992, albeit somewhat later than it did for Azerbaijan and Georgia. The establishment of diplomatic relations, however, was another matter. In statements made at the middle level, directly as well as indirectly, Turkish officials linked that step to a demand that Armenia formally disavow the genocide or any campaign for its recognition and commit itself to ensuring that the diaspora too would do the same.

This was somewhat strange, since it was thought that if there were any preconditions to the establishment of diplomatic relations, it would have been the Armenian side that demanded the recognition of the genocide by Turkey as a precondition. Armenia, however, did not present such a precondition. As stated above, one of the basic precepts of the Armenian National Movement, by then the governing party, had been that the genocide was a historical and moral issue and would not constitute the basis of Armenia's relations with Turkey or be part of Armenia's foreign policy agen-



da.

By the time the first and thus far only official Turkish delegation arrived in Yerevan in July 1992 for formal discussions, Turkey had dropped its precondition. The practical result was an agreement to begin negotiations on the drafting of a "Protocol for the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations". Negotiations began in the fall and continued through the winter. Except for one point, all paragraphs were agreed upon through compromises. Even the remaining point could have been successfully dealt with through additional negotiations, I believe. The occupation of Kelbajar by Armenian forces in April 1993 put an end to these negotiations and, to my knowledge, they

**With the rise of strategic interests and designs in the region, Turkish-Armenian relations acquired a new significance.**

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have not been resumed since. All contacts since then have dealt with the Karabagh conflict or an incremental development of border and economic relations in the absence of diplomatic relations. Turkey links the establishment of diplomatic relations to the conflict of Karabagh, while Armenia continues to present no preconditions to initiate them.

Much of the controversy created by some elements, especially in the diaspora, regarding normalisation of relations between the two countries without preconditions has something to do with Armenian perceptions of Turkish intentions regarding Armenia and Armenians based on the collective memory of the genocide. Was there a Turkish threat to an independent Armenia or could Turkey be a normal neighbour?

Turkey has sent mixed signals. One positive answer came during the first year of independence. The 1992-1993 winter was the worst since independence in many ways. One reason was the critical shortage of wheat created in Armenia as a consequence of the conflict in Abkhazia that resulted in the closing of the only railroad that had remained open into Armenia. That crisis was resolved by the Turkish decision to permit the transport of EU wheat through Turkey. Although only 52 of the 100,000 tons actually arrived – that decision too became a victim of the Armenian occupation of Kelbajar – what arrived was sufficient to pass the winter and develop alternate routes. While this act may not constitute an adequate balance to the refusal of Turkey to open the border and the maintaining of a de facto blockade of Armenia, it does highlight Armenia's vulnerabilities and a dimension in Turk-

ish policy that would undermine the perception of Turkey as the eternal enemy.

Even though diplomatic relations have still not been established between the two countries, a healthy dialogue, often discrete and informal, was maintained throughout former President Levon Ter-Petrosian's administration. The question of the genocide was discussed occasionally and informally, along with other matters of mutual interest. Differences remained. Armenia considered the Turkish position counterproductive to the peace process and Turkey viewed the Armenian position on Nagorno-Karabagh expansionist and suspect. Nonetheless, the two countries maintained a continuing dialogue on a range of issues. That dialogue, even if more formalistic, seems to be continuing today.

With the rise of strategic interests and designs in the region, Turkish-Armenian relations acquired a new significance. Some geostrategists in the region regarded the establishment of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Armenia and the opening of the border – including land and rail connections – as a threat to their own interests. Genocide recognition was a card which some tried to play in ensuring that Turkish-Armenian relations did not normalise.

While Armenia's policy, at least until the end of 1997, was free of these restraints and looked forward to larger and common strategic interests, Turkey remained hostage to its allegiance to the Azerbaijani negotiating strategy of choking Armenia economically and diplomatically. Whatever the reasoning and its underlying motivations, Turkish policy failed to seize a historic opportunity to decrease tensions in the region, thus tending to strengthen the position of those who wanted to impose the traditional view of Turkey and Turks.

### **Genocide and the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict**

Ostensibly, the obstacle to the establishment of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Armenia is the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict. Nagorno-Karabagh and the genocide have their own points of intersection.

First, Nagorno-Karabagh Armenians refer to Azerbaijanis as "Turks," with all the evil and anxiety that the word evokes from history.

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Secondly, the first reaction to the appeal of Nagorno-Karabagh to the Soviet authorities for the incorporation of the Autonomous Region in the Armenian SSR was the pogroms to which Armenians were subjected in the Azerbaijani coastal city of Sumgait. For Armenians in Karabagh, Armenia, and the diaspora, Sumgait – followed by others – raised the spectre of the threat to the nation's survival. Sumgait reconfirmed in the minds of many what did not need such reconfirmation: that Turks are killers. While Azerbaijani leaders blame the Russians, the communist leaders of the time or even Armenians for the pogroms, none have as yet expressed any regret for what happened. Partly as a result of the Sumgait and later Baku pogroms, for the Armenian side the insistence on a strong security package for Nagorno-Karabagh was based on the argument that Armenians could not accept any more deportations and genocides.

It should be noted that the pattern of non-debate on the events in Baku in January 1990 has every resemblance to those in the Ottoman state in 1915. Armenians remember the pogroms against their own that resulted in the expulsion of 200,000; Azerbaijanis remember the invasion by Soviet troops, using the anti-Armenian pogroms as an excuse, to quell the Azerbaijani independence movement.

Thirdly, Turkey is the only country to side completely with Azerbaijan by refusing to establish diplomatic relations and open the borders with Armenia and by providing unquestioned diplomatic support for the Azerbaijani position. It has not been difficult for Armenians to consider Turkey as part of the problem and a party to the conflict rather than as part of the solution, which the Ter-Petrossian administration wanted to do by accepting Turkey as a full partner in the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and more confidential negotiations on the conflict.

Just as in the case of the genocide, the official Turkish discourse ignores the impact of the Azeri policy early on to seek a military solution to the conflict and its inability to deal with the problem. Instead, it focuses on the generally accepted right of the state – especially a powerful one – to do whatever it deems necessary to solve a “secessionist” or “terrorism” problem. Additionally, the Azeri government refuses to see any problems which Armenians in Nagorno-Karabagh may have had while under Azeri jurisdiction and ascribes all grievances to Russian manipulation, just as the Turkish official line refused to consider any problems that Armenians might have had and ascribed difficulties to the role of outsiders.

Fourthly, a former minister of foreign affairs of Azerbaijan, Hasan Hasanov, one day decided, in his infinite wisdom, to take upon himself the battle of the genocide denial and joined in the diminishing chorus by making a public declaration that there had been no genocide in 1915, thus linking the two battles in a manner that could not but help equate Azeris and Turks and represent both as unreconstructed killer groups.

The fifth intersection of the two issues occurred with the change of administration in Yerevan and the assumption of the presidency by Robert Kocharian in early 1998.

While continuing the policy of seeking a normalisation of relations with Turkey without preconditions, President Kocharian – for reasons not fully articulated – decided to bring the question of the recognition of the genocide to the table of negotiations with Turkey and make it part of Armenia's foreign policy discourse, though not a precondition to diplomatic relations.

### **Concluding comments**

It seems that in the battle for and against recognition, both sides appear to be repeating the logic of the past in order to justify it. The tail ends of the two rejectionist positions – comprehensive rejection of the other – seem to be feeding off each other. The vicious circle – from the Turkish Sévres syndrome to Armenians' reliance on intermediaries who are expected to deliver them Turkish territory or Turkish recognition of the genocide, who in turn use Armenians to settle their own accounts with Turkey – must be broken.

We must break that cycle particularly when more often than not the intermediaries have their own share of responsibility but have yet to offer – or be asked for – their own apologies for their share of responsibility in the genocide.

In the words of the poet Yeghishe Charents, we must – all of us – betray our own history – that is, official histories. We must make this problem ours and resolve it ourselves before this new opportunity for normality disappears.

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