

DENIAL AS A SECURITY CONCEPT

*Taner Akcam*¹

If I were to explain the Turkish state's denial of the Armenian Genocide in one word, I would suggest the term *continuity*, both in the sense of lasting perceptions of the problem and in the persistent makeup of the Turkish ruling elite. On this occasion, I will discuss the continuity of Turkish state denial in the first sense of the word.

In September 2005, Turkish intellectuals who questioned the state's denial policy gathered for a conference in Istanbul. Outside in the streets, demonstrators gathered in protest against the conference. One of the placards read: "Not Genocide, but Defense of the Fatherland." Two parallel convictions are at work here, one referring to the past, the other referring to the present. Both the historic events of 1915 and the denial policy nine decades later are framed in terms of Turkish self-defense. Thus, any positive approach towards facing Turkish history and any attempt to open a discussion of historic wrongs are denounced as covert moves in a master plan to partition the country.

For this reason, the defenders of Turkish state denial tend to view historical discussions as a threat to national security. This tangle of past and present in a Gordian knot of self-defensiveness dates back two centuries. From late Ottoman times to the present, there has been a continuous contradiction between the state's concern for secure borders and society's need to come to terms with abuses of human rights. To understand and resolve this contradiction, we need to examine the rise of two opposing historical narratives.

When one discusses Turkish history from a human rights perspective, most people in Turkey become very sensitive. This extraordinary self-defensiveness originates in the breakup of the Ottoman Empire into nation-states, a process that gave rise to divergent and mutually exclusive historical accounts.

Until recently, the dominant narrative has been the story of the partition of the Empire among the Great Powers, which ended

¹ Taner Akcam, historian, teaches at Clark University. Akcam is widely recognized as one of the first Turkish scholars to write extensively and authoritatively on the Turkish genocide of the Armenians in the early 20th century. His most recent book is *A SHAMEFUL ACT: THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE AND THE QUESTION OF TURKISH RESPONSIBILITY* (Metropolitan Books, 2006).

with the Empire's total collapse and disintegration. The foundational works by Ottomanists and Turkish historians contain scarcely a mention of the Christian peoples of the Empire. Scant reference is made to Greeks, Armenians, Bulgarians and others, in Ottoman social and political life, let alone as the victims of massacres and other gross violations of human rights. Instead, Christian communities are painted as the seditious agents of the imperialist Great Powers, continually conspiring against the state, especially in Turkish historiography.

The ethnic and religious minorities, for their part, center themselves within a narrative of persecution, massacre and, especially in the case of the Armenians, wholesale annihilation by their Ottoman rulers. Thanks, in part, to the intervention of the Great Powers, the overall theme of this history is the community's maturation and national emergence.

In this light, Turkish controversy concerning its national history, in particular the Armenian Genocide, can be understood partly as the deployment of two, apparently contradictory, historical narratives. Whenever the proponents of acknowledgment bring up a history of human-rights abuses, they are confronted with the opposing narrative of the decline and breakup of the Ottoman Empire.

However, evidence shows that these two narratives are not contradictory at all. They are two sides of the same coin, complementary perspectives on a single course of human events. Both must be sufficiently understood and appreciated in order to grasp the ambiguities and contradictions of Ottoman and Turkish history.

There have been moments in Ottoman and Turkish history where national security and human rights became inseparably intertwined. One such moment came immediately after the First World War, from 1918 to 1923. While working out the terms of a peace settlement, international diplomacy was preoccupied with two distinct yet related issues. The first was the territorial integrity of the Ottoman state. The second was the wartime atrocities committed by the ruling Union and Progress party against Ottoman-Armenian citizens.

Regarding the territorial integrity of the Ottoman State, the following questions arose: Should the Ottoman state retain its independence? Should new states be permitted to arise from the territory of the Ottoman state? And, if so, how should the borders of these new states be defined? These questions led to the formation of two different viewpoints. Some favored continued sovereignty

within reduced borders, as defined by the 1918 Mounros Ceasefire Treaty.² An emergent group argued for the establishment of new states on both occupied and unoccupied territory of the Ottoman Empire. The successive treaties of Sèvres and Lausanne reflect these divergent points of view.

This immediate postwar period is generally portrayed in terms of conflict among national groups over land and borders, which resulted in the Sèvres treaty of 1920 and the Lausanne treaty of 1923. The general understanding in Turkey is that the Turks, who were the legitimate successors of the Ottoman Empire, defended their remaining territory against the Armenians, Greeks, and some of the Kurds, who were trying to carve up Anatolia into nation-states with the help of the British, French, and Italians.³

The Treaty of Sèvres resolved the question of territory in favor of the non-Turkish nationalities. For the Turks, therefore, Sèvres remains a black mark. The Ottoman leaders who signed the agreement were sentenced to death as traitors by the nationalist movement in Anatolia. For the other nationalities, though Sèvres did not fully reflect their demands for territory, the treaty represents an unprecedented historical opportunity to resolve the issue in their favor. A similar positive attitude can be seen on the Turkish side in regard to the Treaty of Lausanne, which guaranteed Turkish dominance in Anatolia. Therefore, for the Turks, Lausanne stands as a milestone and a validation of their continued national existence. Inversely, the other nationalities see it as a great historical injustice.

This way of portraying history does not fully reflect history as it was experienced. There is another dimension which is equally important and which fundamentally determined the matter of territories and borders. This is the dimension that today would be termed "human rights." The cataclysm, which in large measure determined the course of events in those years, was the genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman government against its Christian population during World War I. It is possible to characterize the prevailing mood among the victorious Entente powers as follows:

² During World War I, The Ottoman Empire collapsed on October 30, 1918. The armistice agreement was signed at Mounros on October 30, 1918 between the Ottoman Empire and Great Britain. One copy of the agreement was passed to the Germans on November 7, and this terminated the alliance between the Ottomans and Germany.

³ Any history book on the Middle East covers detailed information of this period. For more information see, AKCAM, A SHAMEFUL ACT, *supra* note 1.

the “Turks”⁴ organized the massacres of other peoples, mainly the Armenians, during the First World War. Thus, it was necessary to punish the “Turks” and rescue the other peoples (Arabs, Greeks, Armenians, etc.) from Turkish domination. Punishing the “Turks” was implemented in two phases. The first was achieved by individually trying the members of the Ottoman government and other officials who were held to be responsible for the crimes carried out against the other religious and national communities. The second was to limit the “Turks” to a state that would be as small and as weak as possible. A telegram sent to the Paris Peace Conference on April 13, 1919, by the Assistant High Commissioner of Istanbul, Webb, states this policy very clearly:

To punish all persons guilty of Armenian atrocities would necessitate wholesale execution of the Turks, and I therefore suggest a retribution both on a national scale by dismembering the late Turkish Empire, as well as individually by the trial of high officials, such as those on my lists, whose fate will serve as an example.⁵

Ostensibly, the main reason for seeking to partition Anatolia among various national groups was the desire to punish the “Turks” for the barbarities they had committed. That which determined the course of events in the period after 1918 was the perception that the “Turks” had committed “crimes against humanity” — in particular their massacres of the Armenians — and needed to be punished.

Conceptualizing history along the axis of human rights and punishing the “Turks,” as it was described in that period, opens the door to understanding why today every reference to the human rights abuses has been perceived as a problem of national interest and as a problem of security of the state.

WHAT WAS THE ATTITUDE OF TURKISH NATIONAL MOVEMENT TOWARDS PUNISHMENT?

In order to understand the events of the time, recall that post-war Turkey was governed from two political centers. One was Is-

⁴ I place the term “Turks” within quotation marks. Though the term was used in the discussions of the time, it is clear that, in explaining historical events, general terms such as this are not only wrong to use, but also incorrect from the standpoint of attempting to write a history.

⁵ Telegram from Admiral Richard Webb to British Foreign Office, FO 371/4173/53351, at folios 192–93 (Apr. 13, 1919).

tanbul, which was still the capital of the Ottoman Empire and housed the Ottoman government. The other was Ankara, today's capital city, the center of the Turkish Nationalist movement, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Both governments acknowledged the massacres of Armenians and agreed with the Allies that the perpetrators should be punished. However, they disagreed with the Allies regarding the scope and extent of retributive justice. Ankara and Istanbul thought punishment should be limited to the wartime leadership of the Union and Progress Party and the government officials who committed the crimes. These trials were termed "judicially and politically necessary." Both governments vehemently opposed the partition of Anatolia.

The Ankara and Istanbul governments signed a protocol in October of 1919 calling for an election of the Ottoman Parliament according to the constitution. Five protocols were signed. The first protocol declared: "1. Ittihadism – (Party of Union and Progress) or any hint of its reawakening is politically very damaging 4. It is judicially and politically necessary to punish those who committed crimes in connection with the deportation." In the third Protocol both parties agreed that the fugitive members of "Ittihat," who were wanted in connection with the genocide, were not to participate in the elections.⁶ In a letter exchange between Ankara and Istanbul this attitude is defended in the following way: "[I]t would be improper for individuals who are connected to the evil deeds of the Unionists, or persons who have been sullied by the nefarious acts of the deportation and massacre or other wicked actions that are contrary to the true interests of the nation" to participate in the national elections.

Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, condemned the wartime deportation and massacres of Armenians. He criticized the Union and Progress Party and its pan-Turanist, pan-Islamic dreams of territorial expansion. In a conversation with the American General Harbord (September 21, 1919), who was assessing a possible U.S. mandate over Armenia, Kemal said, "[w]e believe in the detrimental nature of 'Turanism'" (*Turanizmin zararlarına inanıyoruz*). In another memorandum, he characterized Turanism as "a dangerous concept."⁷

Atatürk attitude can be summarized by his words to Parliament on April 24, 1920, when he called the atrocities a "shameful

⁶ Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, *Nutuk*, vol. III, İstanbul 1934, 193–94.

⁷ Seçil Akgün, *General Harbord'un Anadolu Gezisi ve Ermeni Meselesine Dair Raporu*, p. 112, n.210, İstanbul 1981.

act.”⁸ He was not a human rights activist or an altruist. As a nationalist and a politician, he believed that trial and punishment were the price of sovereignty. In a letter he stated that the punishment “[s]hould not stay only on paper . . . but should be carried out, since this would successfully impress the foreign elements.”⁹

In short, it was accepted that crimes were committed during the war, and that justice would be served on the leaders of Ittihad and members of the government according to Turkish domestic law. Meanwhile, the partition of Anatolia was firmly rejected. The rationale for such an attitude was the expectation of more favorable results at the Peace Talks following such trials and the desire to maintain the national borders.

The turning point in the Turkish attitude on trials of those suspected of massacres and deportation came when the provisions of the Sèvres Agreement became clear in April 1920. In this agreement, the Entente Powers showed that they interpreted the punishment of the “Turks” as the elimination of the Ottoman state’s right of sovereignty. Because the Turkish nationalist movement opposed this punitive dismemberment, the Court-Martial in Istanbul, under European pressure, began trying not only those accused of war crimes and massacres, but also important Turkish nationalists. In April, 1920, the First Extraordinary Court-Martial in Istanbul began to try the leaders of the Anatolian movement, Mustafa Kemal foremost among them, and sentenced them to death in absentia. When the Turkish nationalists realized that their support for the punishment of war criminals would not prevent the partition of Anatolia, their attitude towards the territory issue changed.

A letter written by Atatürk to Istanbul on August 20, 1920 highlights this shift in attitude. He states that, “[t]he Ottoman Government . . . continues to hang the children of the homeland on accusations of [having perpetrated] deportation and massacres, which now became totally senseless.”¹⁰ He meant that the Ottoman government’s punishment of the “Turks” for what they had done to the Christian minorities would make sense only if Turkey received some positive result, possibly including a better treaty to secure the Ottoman territories. However, Sèvres was signed, Otto-

⁸ *Atatürk’ün TBMM Açık ve Gizli Oturumlarındaki Konuşmaları, vol. I* (Ankara, 1992).

⁹ Sina Akşin, *İstanbul Hükümetleri ve Milli Mücadele, Son Meşrutiyet (1919-1921)*, Volume II, p. 316, İstanbul 1992.

¹⁰ Letter from Mustafa Kemal, first President of Turkey, to Istanbul (Aug. 20, 1920), in *MALTA SÜRGÜNLERİ 334* (Bilal Şimşir ed. 1985) (letter written to the first Grand Vizier of the Armistice period, Ahmet İzzet Paşa, with its contents intended for communication to the British High Commission).

man sovereignty was not acknowledged, and Ottoman territories were distributed among different nations. Therefore, these “senseless” death sentences should be halted.

The merger of these two distinct and different issues of the period, “territory and borders” vs. “human rights,” and the preeminence of the former over the latter, meant that human rights concerns were suppressed and forgotten, except as a continuing threat to national security.

At the beginning of this talk I referred to the Gordian knot of Turkish history. The site of ancient Gordium is located about an hour southwest of Ankara. According to legend, whoever untied the Gordian knot was destined to rule Asia Minor. Alexander the Great fulfilled the prophecy by slicing the knot in half. But there is another, more lasting solution.

I have tried to show that if the Western forces had taken the nationalist demands concerning the borders seriously and had negotiated for trials in cases of “crimes against humanity” in return, we might be talking about a very different history today. The Turkish nationalist movement was mainly shaped by the linkage between these two issues. As national sovereignty concerns became paramount, human rights were doomed to be forgotten. For this reason, this aspect of history, including the Armenian Genocide, has been consigned to oblivion in modern Turkey.

Restoring a human rights perspective to Turkish history reveals two important issues. First, Atatürk condemnation of the Armenian massacres is diametrically opposed to the current official Turkish policy of denial. His viewpoint during the difficult war years, although it is definitely not far enough from today’s perspective, could be a positive starting point for a resolution. To become a truly democratic member of the society of nations, Turkey must confront this “dark chapter” of its history, this “shameful act,” as Atatürk called the Armenian genocide.

Second, until now, the Turkish-Armenian problem has been perceived within the old paradigm which produced these conflicts; namely, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the clash of different ethnic or national groups over lands and boundaries. We have to change this understanding. What we need is a new paradigm and to rethink the Armenian-Turkish conflict. To date, the problem has been perceived in terms of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and ethnic conflicts over territory. I suggest that we must reposition the Armenian-Turkish conflict within the new paradigm of transitional justice, as a part of the democratization effort

within existing nation-states. The conflict should not be regarded as merely a dispute between two parties over territories and boundaries, but rather as a human rights issue between them. Both parties, especially the nation-states of Turkey and Armenia, should deal with the past as a part of their democratization process and try to redefine themselves and their perception of the other's identity. This can be done only if we patiently disentangle the question of human rights from the questions of territory and national security. The question of territory should be considered resolved and should remain closed. The question of human rights remains unresolved and must be reopened.