

## RECONCILIATION PROCESSES

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### How has the Turkish state's official discourse of the Armenian genocide evolved during the Erdogan era?

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*Turkey has failed to recognize the massacres of 1915 as genocide for over one hundred years. The reasons are profound and extend deep into the sense of identity that Turks and the Turkish state have sought to form since the birth of the country. The article considers why the denial has been the case in the face of the overwhelming historical evidence and whether there have been any potential changes under the leadership of Erdogan. It argues that the Turkish state's official discourse of the Armenian genocide has evolved during the Erdogan era, meanwhile stressing that it is important not to overstate the extent to which the discourse has evolved. Although Erdogan has adopted a softer and a more conciliatory tone at times, he has stayed consistent on the fundamental issue of recognizing the term genocide throughout this process.*

#### Keywords

The Armenian genocide, denial, Erdogan, Turkey, official discourse

The Armenian genocide has been considered to be the “first modern genocide”, because it involved “creating a national state through the annihilation of foreign elements”<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, the Armenian genocide is often addressed in eerily familiar terms to the Nazi Holocaust, with historians and past Turkish leaders referring to the “Armenian question” and highlighting both the internal and international aspects of it<sup>2</sup>. The Armenians had a rich cultural history, but were also familiar with persecution for many centuries before the twentieth century as they tended to be located on the strategic crossroad between the West and the East<sup>3</sup>. Throughout its history, Armenia was conquered by Romans,

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<sup>1</sup> **Bloxham D.**, *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> **Hovannisian R. G.**, *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective*, London, Transaction Publishers, 2009, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> **Hovannisian R. G.**, *Op. Cit.*

Greeks, Persians, Mongols, Byzantines, Russians and Arabs before becoming absorbed into the Ottoman Empire in 1453 under the rule of Sultan Mehmed II<sup>4</sup>. During the sixteenth century Armenia was subject to competition from Persia until an armistice agreement was reached and Western Armenia was apportioned to the Ottoman Empire and Eastern Armenia fell into the hands of Persia<sup>5</sup>.

During the Ottoman era the abuses perpetrated against the Armenian minority steadily intensified, culminating in the Armenian genocide that began in 1915. Turkey has failed to recognize these events as genocide for over one hundred years and this article will consider why this has been the case in the face of overwhelming historical evidence and whether there have been any potential changes that can be detected as having taken place in the Erdogan era. The article will begin by briefly providing an overview of the genocide before considering the idea of denial from a theoretical standpoint as well as Turkey's history of denial. It will then move on to consider any potential changes under the leadership of Erdogan as well as important international and domestic factors affecting the debate over the Armenian genocide. It will be argued throughout that the changes under Erdogan have largely involved a softening of tone and a more conciliatory message that is in tune with Turkish public opinion, but at a fundamental level there continues to be a lack of genuine movement towards accepting the term genocide that is unlikely to change in the near future.

## **Overview of the Armenian genocide**

Whilst the Ottoman Empire was an inclusive project in which religious minorities were tolerated and certain Armenians were able to attain high office within government, the situation for many Armenians living outside an urban environment tended to be very different<sup>6</sup>. In such rural

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<sup>4</sup> **Parker P. O.**, *Roots Matter: Healing History, Honoring Heritage, Renewing Hope*. Amsterdam, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> **Parker P. O.**, *Op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> **Tas L.**, *Legal Pluralism in Action: Dispute Resolution and the Kurdish Peace Committee*, London, Taylor & Francis, 2016; **Saltman R.**, *Sacred Humanism*

environments Armenians were subject to religious persecution at the hands of the Muslim majority and were often forced to convert to Islam as well as being kidnapped and subject to exploitative taxation<sup>7</sup>. This increasing level of persecution culminated in the slaughter of between 100,000-200,000 Armenians under Sultan Abdul Hamid II between 1894-1896 and an additional slaughter of 30,000 Armenians in the Adna region in 1909<sup>8</sup>. Historians have debated whether one should view the Armenian genocide that was to follow as constituting one continuous trend of persecution dating back to the sixteenth century or whether the influence of the Young Turk movement with its nationalist and ethnic emphasis marked a radical departure in the persecution of the Armenian minority<sup>9</sup>. However, regardless of the underlying motivations in April 1915 the Armenian genocide began with the Turkish authorities issuing arrest warrants for a range of Armenian intellectuals<sup>10</sup>. The weight of the evidence in relation to their slaughter and a campaign of subsequent extermination of the Armenian minority is indisputable: reports from US consular officials, a range of archival materials belonging to a host of countries, records of trials of the perpetrators of the genocide, eyewitness accounts from survivors and Western witnesses, media coverage and investigations by historians all corroborate the broad outlines of what took place during this period<sup>11</sup>. Between 1-1.5 million Armenians were either directly killed or died as a result of being forced into deportation convoys and many Armenians were forced to convert to Islam, with women in particular often being raped and forced into marriages with Turkish men<sup>12</sup>.

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without Miracles: Responding to the New Atheists, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> **Saltman R.**, Op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> **Rubenstein R. L.**, Jihad and Genocide, Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> **Rubenstein R. L.**, Op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> **Eckersley S., Lloyd K., Whitehead C., Mason R.**, Museums, Migration and Identity in Europe: Peoples, Places and Identities, London, Routledge, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> **Demirdjian A.**, The Armenian Genocide Legacy. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> **Demirdjian A.**, Op. cit.

## **Conceptualizing the denial of the Armenian genocide by the Turkish state**

The concept of denial and “genocide denial” in particular is clearly a key concept within this analysis and it is important to clarify its precise meaning and the ways to understand this term<sup>13</sup>. According to Schrodtt, there are two reasons for denial; people can either deny facts out of ignorance or can deny facts by deceit<sup>14</sup>. Denials out of ignorance are arguably more forgivable and understandable, because it proceeds from the starting point that denials are based upon an insufficient amount of knowledge<sup>15</sup>. However, denials by deceit and what Schrodtt refers to as “impostors” is very different, because in order to deny something on this basis it is necessary to share some level of facts and methodology with those advancing the opposite position<sup>16</sup>. Schrodtt refers to this as the denial paradox, because “in order to deny something, you need to first know about it”<sup>17</sup>. After the formation of Turkey in 1923 there was a clear desire on the part of senior leaders to create new structures and institutions and in this context these leaders provided no space for acknowledgement of the Armenian genocide<sup>18</sup>.

This “nation-building project” undertaken by Ataturk, the founder of Turkey, sought to engender a deep sense of cultural fellowship and a strong national identity, and the denial of the Armenian genocide in its immediate aftermath must be appreciated in this institutional and ideological framework<sup>19</sup>. As Kaya points out, denial operated at a systemic level in the institutions of Turkey during its foundation, because not only would Ataturk not accept that the Armenian genocide had taken place, but he also sought to deny the existence of non-Turkish minorities

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<sup>13</sup> **Schrodtt N.**, *Modern Turkey and the Armenian Genocide: An Argument About the Meaning of the Past*, New York, Springer International Publishing, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> **Schrodtt N.**, *Op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> **Schrodtt N.**, *Op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> **Schrodtt N.**, *Op. cit.*, p. 264.

<sup>17</sup> **Schrodtt N.**, *Op. cit.*, p. 265.

<sup>18</sup> **Demirdjian A.**, *Op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> **Kaya M. S.**, *The Zaza Kurds of Turkey: A Middle Eastern Minority in a Globalised Society*, New York, I. B. Tauris, 2011.

within Turkey, which stood in sharp contrast to the Ottoman Empire<sup>20</sup>. Once in power, Ataturk promoted a modernization, secularization and Westernization agenda and it is perhaps not surprising that one part of his attempt to modernize Turkey was involved a concerted effort to forget and deny the Armenian genocide<sup>21</sup>. He founded the Turkish Historical Society in 1931, which would control the official history of the Turkish state and one example of the fictitious history that would emerge from this body would be later estimates suggesting that only 150,000 people were killed during the Armenian genocide<sup>22</sup>. However, the Turkish Historical Society played a far more all-encompassing role than merely addressing the Armenian genocide, because it sought nothing less than a fundamental rewriting of Turkish history<sup>23</sup>. Ataturk even changed the Turkish alphabet in a bid to move the Turkish language away from its Ottoman roots, liberating it in his words from the “yoke of foreign tongues”<sup>24</sup>.

This meant that future generations were not able to appreciate the history of the Ottoman Empire to the same extent, because they were hindered from understanding Islamic languages that featured in Arabic scripts<sup>25</sup>. The toleration and diversity of the Ottoman Empire were struck from official Turkish history and the aim was to portray Turkey as a modern and powerful nation with an ethnically homogenous population<sup>26</sup>. This “distorting of the historical record” had profound implications for the role of Armenians within the Ottoman Empire and the ways in which Turkish schoolchildren as well as others came to understand Turkey's past<sup>27</sup>. There were no mentions of Armenians until the Middle Ages and

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<sup>20</sup> **Kaya M. S.**, Op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> **Alayarian A.**, *Consequences of Denial, The Armenian Genocide*, London, Karnac Books, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> **Kramer P. A.**, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> **Bobelian M.**, *Children of Armenia: A Forgotten Genocide and the Century-long Struggle for Justice*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> **Papadakis Y.**, *Echoes from the Dead Zone: Across the Cyprus Divide*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2005, p. 27.

<sup>25</sup> **Papadakis Y.**, Op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> **Bobelian M.**, Op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> **Bobelian M.**, Op. cit., p. 80.

they only featured rarely in more recent history and naturally the Armenian genocide “went unspoken”<sup>28</sup>. In addition to this intellectual erasure, the Turkish government systematically sought to wipe any physical trace of the Armenian presence off the face of the earth, including through the destruction of Armenian architecture and monuments<sup>29</sup>. This state-sanctioned behavior generated a substantial amount of institutional momentum that continued long after the death of Atatürk<sup>30</sup>. Jones points to significant funding dedicated to public relations and in particular American university endowments that were seen as capable of erecting a defensible position in relation to the Armenian genocide denial<sup>31</sup>. It is important to understand, therefore, that the denial was not merely a cultural process that emerged organically as a result of the thinking and wishes of ordinary Turkish people and that throughout the history of denial there has been a concerted effort by the Turkish state to drive the narrative in relation to the events of 1915.

It is also necessary to understand the history of denial by the Turkish government in the context of the presence of other ethnic minorities in Turkey. In this sense it is necessary to appreciate the potential implications that the admission of guilt could have for the relationship between Turkey and other ethnic minorities within its borders as well as for the goal of generating homogeneity in the country. The Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 granted protected status to Armenian, Greek and Jewish minorities in Turkey, but persecution of these minorities continued<sup>32</sup>. Research conducted by the Armenian National Institute demonstrates that since 1923 the treatment of minorities by the Turkish government has oscillated between neglect and repression and that during the Second World War all of these minorities were subject to

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> **Jones A.**, *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction*, London, Taylor & Francis, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> **Jones A.**, *Op. cit.*

<sup>31</sup> **Jones A.**, *Op. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> **Gellman M.**, *Democratization and Memories of Violence: Ethnic Minority Rights Movements in Mexico, Turkey, and El Salvador*, London, Taylor & Francis, 2016; Armenian National Institute 2017, Turkey, Republic of and the Armenian genocide, <http://www.armenian-genocide.org/recognition/countries.html> (18.04.2017).

exploitative taxation<sup>33</sup>. Violence has also erupted against minorities and in 1955 the majority of Greeks were expelled from Turkey after violent clashes in Istanbul<sup>34</sup>. Many Jews have also escaped to Israel to avoid persecution and the net result of persecution, neglect and marginalization after the Second World War has been a fifty percent fall in the Armenian population of 150,000 between the end of the First World War and the mid-1990s<sup>35</sup>. One further minority population brings an added dimension, because the ongoing violence against Kurds by the Turkish government and military clashes between Kurdish groups and the Turkish government highlight the role that Turkish national security plays in relation to the treatment of minorities<sup>36</sup>. This means that any potential concessions, for example in the form of recognizing the Armenian genocide, could be interpreted as potential signs of weaknesses by other minority groups, which ultimately could threaten the survival of the Turkish state and the territorial integrity of the country.

It is clear, therefore, that the reasons why Turkey has failed to accept the Armenian genocide are profound and that they extend deep into the sense of identity that Turks and the Turkish state have sought to form since the birth of the country. The extent of the attachment to denial is evident from the fact that Turkey's stance in relation to the Armenian genocide has remained largely consistent for over a century<sup>37</sup>. The Turkish government has responded to calls to recognize the genocide with a mixture of silence and denial and Alayarian argues that this type of "social amnesia" can only occur in a context in which a substantial amount of rewriting of history has occurred<sup>38</sup>. Alayarian points to a set of deliberate cover ups and a rewriting of history from a cultural and intellectual perspective that includes inaccurate records, propaganda, forged documents, destruction of archives, bribery of intellectuals and

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<sup>33</sup> Armenian National Institute, Op. cit.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> **Gunes C.**, *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Protest to Resistance*, London, Taylor & Francis, 2013.

<sup>37</sup> Turkey must end its 100 years of genocide denial, *The Guardian*, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/apr/21/turkey-100-years-genocide-denial-Armenia>, (17.04.2017).

<sup>38</sup> **Alayarian A.**, Op. cit., p. 4.

penal measures taken against a range of individuals<sup>39</sup>. Returning to the theme of denial by deceit highlighted above, it is clear that successive Turkish government and Turkish institutions have had significant knowledge of events during the Armenian genocide and therefore claiming that their denials are based upon ignorance is wholly unconvincing. The story might be somewhat different for the Turkish population, which has for successive generations been provided with a fictitious history of its country, but in the digital age it seems increasingly unlikely that ordinary citizens would not have access to the facts regarding the genocide.

However, the denials of Turkish leaders in the past on the question of whether the events in 1915 constituted genocide have been emphatic and unambiguous<sup>40</sup>. In 1994, Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Ciller stated “it is evident today that the Armenian claims are unfounded and illusory in light of historical facts. Armenians were not subjected to genocide in any way”<sup>41</sup>. A central plank of the Turkish denial is the argument that the events of 1915 did not constitute a genocide and that instead they were part of a civil war and wartime relocations<sup>42</sup>. The nature of the emphatic denials are understandable in the sense that the Turkish government has for generations either sought to silence history or erase it and given the large amount of institutional resources dedicated to this project a sudden admission of guilt or concessions would clash fundamentally with a range of vested interests<sup>43</sup>. The extent to which the Turkish government sought to repress debate in relation to the Armenian genocide within its own borders became apparent in 2005 when Article 159 of the Turkish Penal Code was replaced by Article 301<sup>44</sup>. Article 301 stated that “public denigration of Turkishness, the Republic or the Grand National Assembly of Turkey shall be punishable by imprisonment of

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<sup>39</sup> **Alayarian A.**, *Op. cit.*

<sup>40</sup> **Macdonald D. B.**, *Identity Politics in the Age of Genocide: The Holocaust and Historical Representation*, London, Taylor & Francis, 2007.

<sup>41</sup> **Macdonald D. B.**, *Op. cit.*, p. 115.

<sup>42</sup> **Totten S., Jacobs S. L.**, *Pioneers of Genocide Studies*, London, Transaction Publishers, 2013.

<sup>43</sup> **Totten S., Jacobs S. L.**, *Op. cit.*

<sup>44</sup> **Halliday T. C., Karpik L., Feeley M. M.**, *Fighting for Political Freedom: Comparative Studies of the Legal Complex and Political Liberalism*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007.



between six months and three years”<sup>45</sup>. Despite the obvious issues of liberty and freedom of expression that could be seen as being violated by this law, it also led to a number of noteworthy cases in which journalists such as Hrant Dink became embroiled in legal action for refusing to adhere to Article 301<sup>46</sup>. Dink refused to stop using the word genocide and in an environment of increasing death threats against him by the Turkish nationalists he was eventually assassinated on 19 January 2007 in front of the offices of his own newspaper<sup>47</sup>.

### **Potential shifts in the Erdogan era**

When one considers the weight of the evidence presented above and the consistency as well as the ferocity of Turkish denials of the Armenian genocide it seems virtually impossible to discuss potential strong shifts and a significant amelioration of the tension at the state level, but there is some evidence to suggest that this process has been occurring in contemporary Turkish politics and society. At a personal level, Erdogan has experience of falling foul of the law and of identity politics, as during the 1990s he was arrested and jailed for reading a poem with religious metaphors at a public rally<sup>48</sup>. However, in public the tone of Erdogan towards the question of accepting and recognizing the Armenian genocide appears to be a continuation of previous generations of Turkish leaders<sup>49</sup>. It is important to begin the analysis of the Erdogan era by assessing his public statements on the issue, because as leader of the country his views and pronouncements set the tone for political discourse in Turkey. When compared to the statements of earlier Turkish leaders that offered an adamant and forthright objection of Armenian claims

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<sup>45</sup> Halliday T. C., Karpik L., Feeley M. M., Op. cit., p. 242.

<sup>46</sup> Swaim L., Trauma Bond: An Inquiry into the Nature of Evil, London, JHP, 2013.

<sup>47</sup> Swaim L., Op. cit.

<sup>48</sup> Mandaville P., Islam and Politics, London, Taylor & Francis, 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Erdogan: Armenia "genocide" used to blackmail Turkey, *Al-Jazeera*, 4 June, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/erdogan-armenia-genocide-blackmail-turkey-160604151409300.html>, (17.04.2017).

Erdogan's rhetoric has certainly been more conciliatory by comparison<sup>50</sup>. However, it is important to stress that it is only by comparison to earlier statements that the tone in particular is different and that in relation to the content of the messages there continues to be significant continuity with earlier denials.

A few months before assuming the Presidency, Erdogan offered a set of “unprecedented condolences” to the grandchildren of Armenians killed by Ottoman soldiers in the First World War<sup>51</sup>. He cited the “inhumane treatment” that Armenians had suffered, and this statement was significant for a number of reasons<sup>52</sup>. Firstly, the timing was significant as the statement was released on the eve of the 99<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the 1915 massacre<sup>53</sup>. Secondly, it was important at the conceptual level, because it signalled a break with the old nationalist portrayal of Armenians as “traitors”, because one does “not offer condolences to traitors”<sup>54</sup>. Thirdly, and most significantly, this break with past discourses illustrates a potential willingness to step forward from the traditional position of denial that has characterized almost one hundred years of rhetoric on the part of Turkish leaders<sup>55</sup>. Since this point Erdogan has reiterated his belief in the necessity to find common ground between Armenians and Turks and has stated that “we will always remind and remember the culture of cohabitation between Turks and Armenians which has a history of almost one thousand years”<sup>56</sup>. It is important to note as will be highlighted below that Erdogan

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<sup>50</sup> Turkey reinstates Vatican envoy after row over Pope's Armenian remarks, *Reuters*, 4 February, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-vatican-armenians-idUSKCN0VD1QT>, (17.04.2017).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Rethink Institute 2014, 2015 Turkey Country Report. Washington, Rethink Institute, p. 70.

<sup>53</sup> Turkish PM offers condolences over 1915 Armenian massacre, *The Guardian*, 23 April, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/23/turkey-erdogan-condolences-armenian-massacre>, (17.04.2017).

<sup>54</sup> **De Waal T.**, *Great Catastrophe: Armenians and Turks in the Shadow of Genocide*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015.

<sup>55</sup> **Demirdjian A.**, *Op. cit.*

<sup>56</sup> Erdogan: Turkey is "most meaningful place" to mark Armenian genocide, *Newsweek*, 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/erdogan-turkey-most-meaningful-place-mark-armenian-genocide-452030> (18.04.2017).

continues to refuse to use the term genocide in relation to the killings of Armenians in 1915, but his comments on a visit to the Armenian Patriarchate of Turkey on 15 April 2016 offered a significant softening of tone and stance in comparison to previous Turkish leaders<sup>57</sup>. He stated that “I welcome this commemoration which is taking place once again in Turkey, the most meaningful place to share the grief endured by the Ottoman Armenians, as well as to honor their memories”<sup>58</sup>.

However, it is important to note that despite the significance of this statement President Erdogan continues to refuse to employ the term genocide to refer to the killings and at times his rhetoric on the subject has remained eerily reminiscent of earlier phases of Turkish denial, arguably progressing to belligerence when he feels cornered by the international community on the subject<sup>59</sup>. He has stated that requests to accept that the events were genocide would “go in one ear and out from the other” and that Turkey will “never” accept the accusation that these events constitute genocide<sup>60</sup>. One important dimension must be recognized in relation to Erdogan's statements, regardless of whether they are viewed as a continuation of existing Turkish denials or as a break with the past, is the Armenian response. The response of the Armenian National Committee in the United States, for example, has been scathing<sup>61</sup>. According to Aram Hamparian, the Turkish government under Erdogan is merely “repackaging its genocide denials”<sup>62</sup>. He went on to state his position unambiguously claiming that “the fact remains that, as this cold-hearted and cynical ploy so plainly demonstrates, Turkey is, today, escalating its denial of truth and obstruction of justice for the Armenian genocide”<sup>63</sup>. Even attempts to argue that Turkey remains the most meaningful place to commemorate the events of 1915 by Erdogan

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Erdogan: Armenia "genocide"...Op. cit.; Turkey cannot accept Armenian genocide label, *The Guardian*, April 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/15/turkey-cannot-accept-armenia-genocide-label-erdogan>, (17.04.2017).

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Turkish PM offers..., Op. cit.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

have been met with strong opposition by the Armenian foreign ministry<sup>64</sup>. These comments in 2016 were interpreted by the Armenians at an official level as an attempt to “equalize victims of war and those who became victims of genocide” and according to the Armenian government “Turkey's denialist stance further deepens the gap between the Armenian and Turkish people, while the best way to fill it is facing history and repentance”<sup>65</sup>.

### **Understanding potential changes in the Erdogan era**

Despite the fervent Armenian rejections of a potential softening in tone under the leadership of Erdogan it would appear to be an overstatement on the part of advocates of the Armenian position to claim that there has been no change in relation to the stance on the Armenian genocide under Erdogan. One pivotal dimension that needs to be borne in mind in relation to the potential change of stance under Erdogan and Armenian rebuttals is the extent to which debates regarding the Armenian genocide have assumed an international character in recent years<sup>66</sup>. There have been a range of parliamentary resolutions in European countries in addition to those of the European Parliament that have sought to recognize the Armenian genocide<sup>67</sup>. As Terzi points out, this has injected a modicum of instability into Turkish discourses and the overall consciousness of the Turkish population towards the events of 1915, because it challenges the internal history propagated by the Turkish state that the killings were the result of mutual hostilities and traditional warfare<sup>68</sup>. At present, 26 countries officially recognize the Armenian genocide and whilst this is still a relatively low number the response of the Erdogan administration towards international efforts to recognize the Armenian genocide raise concerns about the potential for genuine

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<sup>64</sup> Erdogan: Turkey is..., Op. cit.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> **Kappler S., Kasparian S., Godin R., Chabot J.**, Mass Media and the Genocide of the Armenians: One Hundred Years of Uncertain Representation, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016.

<sup>67</sup> **Terzi Ö.**, The Influence of the European Union on Turkish Foreign Policy, London, Taylor & Francis, 2016.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

reconciliation on this issue<sup>69</sup>. Petasis credits a “vigorous and aggressive campaign by the Armenian diaspora to get the genocide recognized” as being responsible for a marked shift in the international landscape and in 2015 a range of events put President Erdogan under substantial international pressure<sup>70</sup>.

When Pope Francis referred to the Armenian genocide as the first genocide of the twentieth century in 2015 Turkey withdrew its ambassador from the Vatican for a period of ten months, which is considered a substantial period of time in the diplomatic community<sup>71</sup>. However, as the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armenian genocide approached in 2015 the comments of Pope Francis served merely as a harbinger for events to come<sup>72</sup>. In April 2015, the Austrian Parliament officially declared that the events of 1915 constituted genocide and the Turkish reaction to this was emphatic<sup>73</sup>. Turkey withdrew its ambassador and produced a terse statement that spoke of “the outrage” caused by the declaration and argued that it would have “permanent negative effects on Turkey-Austria relations”<sup>74</sup>. The passage of a resolution by the German Parliament on 2 June 2016 drew the ire of Turkey's government once more<sup>75</sup>. The reaction was very similar, as the ambassador was recalled from Berlin and discussions of damaged bilateral ties featured heavily in the course of the Turkish response<sup>76</sup>. The response of Erdogan to the

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<sup>69</sup> Armenian National Institute, Countries that recognise the Armenian Genocide, 2017, [http://www.armenian-genocide.org/recognition\\_countries.html](http://www.armenian-genocide.org/recognition_countries.html) (18.04.2017); **Hunter S. T.**, *God on Our Side: Religion in International Affairs*, Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016.

<sup>70</sup> **Petasis A.**, *Intractable Dilemmas in the Energy-Rich Eastern Mediterranean*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016.

<sup>71</sup> **Mccormack J.**, *Unexpected Treason: Barack Hussein Obama*, Philadelphia, BB, 2016; Turkey reinstates..., Op. cit.

<sup>72</sup> Turkey says Austrian accusation of Armenian genocide damages ties permanently, *Reuters*, 22 April, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-erdogan-armenia-idUSKBN0ND1AD20150422>, (18.04.2017).

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> **Hunter S. T.**, Op. cit.

<sup>76</sup> Turkey recalls ambassador after German MPs Armenian genocide vote, *The Guardian*, June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/02/germany-braces-for-turkish-backlash-as-it-votes-to-recognise-armenian-genocide>, (18.04.2017).

German resolution is noteworthy, because it represented some of the strongest condemnations of the international attempts to recognize the genocide by him and illustrated the extent of continuity between him and previous Turkish administrations<sup>77</sup>. Describing international efforts to recognize the genocide as “blackmail” being used as a “stick against Turkey Erdogan underscored his central message in relation to the issue in plain terms: “I am addressing the whole world. You may like it, you may not. Our attitude on the Armenian issue is clear from the beginning. We will never accept the accusations of genocide”<sup>78</sup>.

It is important to recognize that such rebuttals and retaliations on the part of the Turkish government are part of a long history of reacting angrily towards international condemnations<sup>79</sup>. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the European Parliament, Cyprus, Greece, Italy and the senates of Russia and Belgium all employed the term genocide to refer to the events of 1915 and in 2001 the French government adopted a bill recognizing the Armenian genocide<sup>80</sup>. Turkey withdrew its ambassador from France and cancelled a \$200 million military intelligence contract<sup>81</sup>. There are clear consistencies between this behavior and the ways in which the Erdogan government has reacted to international condemnation and as a result one must question whether shifts in tone under Erdogan have led to any substantial changes of action. When one considers that Turkey has sought to offer a more conciliatory tone, arguing that Turks and Armenians must “work jointly to find ways forward” and that “Turkey is willing to do its part” then there seems to be a conspicuous lack of action backing up these softer sentiments<sup>82</sup>. However, the question of the Armenian genocide has a domestic as well as an international dimension and this is important to bear in mind when considering the ways in which the Erdogan government has approached

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<sup>77</sup> Erdogan: Armenia "genocide"..., Op. cit.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> **Hovannisian R. G.**, *Looking Backward, Moving Forward: Confronting the Armenian Genocide*, London, Transaction Publishers, 2009.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> ECHR: Why turkey won't talk about the Armenian genocide, *The Telegraph*, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/turkey/11373115/Amal-Clooneys-latest-case-Why-Turkey-wont-talk-about-the-Armenian-genocide.html>, (18.04.2017).

and framed the issue. Firstly, from the perspective of the Turkish public and electorate opinion polls have revealed how the Turkish public tends to approach the question of whether the events of 1915 ought to be classed as a genocide. A poll conducted by the Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (EDAM) in Turkey in 2014 found a mixed picture in relation to how the Turkish government should respond at the policy level to the Armenian genocide<sup>83</sup>(EDAM, 2015).

Only 9.1% of Turks believe that the government should recognize the events of 1915 as a genocide, but significantly there is a clear recognition on the part of Turks that a substantial number of people lost their lives during this period<sup>84</sup>. This is significant, because it is likely that in earlier periods many Turks might not even have been aware of the massacres and that therefore they would not have had any view on the issue at all. A further 9.1% believe that Turkey should apologize to the Armenians without using the term genocide and 12% believe that regret ought to be expressed without using the term genocide<sup>85</sup>. 23.5% believe that all the Ottoman citizens that lost their lives need to be viewed equally and 21.3% believe that no steps need to be taken regarding the Armenian issues whatsoever<sup>86</sup>. The final 25% of Turks claimed that they were unaware of the issue or had no response to give<sup>87</sup>. In this context, President Erdogan is reflecting the views of the Turkish public quite accurately when he adopts the type of position that he has adopted, offering apologies and a conciliatory tone, but unwilling to cross the red line for many Turks, which is invoked by employing the term genocide.

Within Turkey itself it is important to recognize that despite the intransigence there have been efforts over the past twenty years to begin a meaningful public dialogue<sup>88</sup>. In 2001, a Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Committee was formed and a year before Turkish and

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<sup>83</sup> EDAM 2015, Turkey regretful over the Armenian tragedy of 1915 but refuse to qualify it as a genocide, <http://www.edam.org.tr/en/File?id=2162> (18.04.2017).

<sup>84</sup> Ibid

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> **De Waal T.**, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*, New York, NYU Press, 2003.

Armenian historians met and corresponded openly<sup>89</sup>. In 2008, under much fanfare began a period referred to as “football diplomacy” that started with a visit to an Armenian-Turkish football match by Turkish president Abdullah Gul to which the Armenian President reciprocated by attending a match in 2009 in Turkey<sup>90</sup>. At that time there was hope for a normalization of relations and a re-opening of the Turkish-Armenian border<sup>91</sup>. However, whilst the Erdogan era may have begun with a softer tone towards the Armenian genocide domestic political developments in recent years have also begun to exert an influence upon the issue as political instability within Turkey has increased<sup>92</sup>. Questions over Turkey's human rights record, continuing conflict with Kurds, a refugee crisis brought on by the conflict in Syria as well as an attempted military coup against Erdogan have all undermined political stability in the country<sup>93</sup>. A constitutional referendum on 16 April 2017 won narrowly by President Erdogan continues to highlight deep schisms within domestic Turkish politics<sup>94</sup>. In this context it is arguable that President Erdogan has less room for manoeuvre and compromise, particularly when criticism is amplified by the international community<sup>95</sup>. This is because such international condemnation tends to lead to retrenchment and a hardening of attitudes within Turkey, which is something that Erdogan must be responsive to as Turkey's highest elected political representative<sup>96</sup>.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that the official discourse of the Turkish state has evolved during the Erdogan era, but that it is important not to overstate the extent to which the discourse has evolved. A cynical

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<sup>89</sup> **De Waal T.**, Op. cit.

<sup>90</sup> **Kambeck M., Ghazaryan S.**, *Europe's Next Avoidable War: Nagorno-Karabakh*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013, p. 119; **Finkel A.**, *Turkey: What Everyone Needs to Know?*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>91</sup> **Kambeck M., Ghazaryan S.**, Op. cit.

<sup>92</sup> **Hunter S. T.**, Op. cit.

<sup>93</sup> **Hunter S. T.**, Op. cit.

<sup>94</sup> Turkey Referendum, *BBC News*, 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-39626116> Accessed (18.04.2017).

<sup>95</sup> **Finkel A.**, Op. cit

<sup>96</sup> **Finkel A.**, Op. cit



perspective towards Erdogan's official position would be to argue that it represents nothing more than a superficial change and many advocates of the Armenian position have put forward this argument with considerable justification. In circumstances when Turkey has been subject to intense international pressure to recognize the genocide Erdogan has left little doubt that he is unwilling to move down this path. However, as the article has shown it is important to recognize a number of historical, political, cultural and social dimensions that are relevant to the question of the Armenian genocide within Turkey. Since the formation of the Turkish state a very particular form of identity politics has been inextricably linked to the question of the Armenian genocide as Turkish leaders have sought to erase the past of the Ottoman Empire from the Turkish collective consciousness. This rewriting of history has had profound effects upon the culture, politics and society of Turkey and the nationalism that it has engendered sits uncomfortably alongside the impulse of recognizing past atrocities committed against minorities, particularly when certain minorities continue to exercise a perceived existential threat against the Turkish state and Turkish homogeneity.

In this sense, it is perhaps not surprising that genocide denial has remained remarkably consistent feature of Turkish politics and identity for over one hundred years and it is impossible to call it anything other than denial when one considers the weight of historical evidence demonstrating that the events of 1915 were indeed a genocide. Without question Erdogan has adopted a softer and more conciliatory tone at times, but on the fundamental issue of recognizing the term genocide he has stayed consistent throughout this process. When the perceptions and feelings of the general public in Turkey are considered Erdogan is putting forward a relatively representative view that many Turks hold towards the Armenian question, which also reflects a slight softening but general unwillingness to accept the term genocide. International pressure over the past few years seems to have been counter-productive in many ways, hardening positions on both sides and leading to an inflammation of tensions and rhetoric from

Erdogan as he seeks to justify this Turkish perspective. In this context it seems overly optimistic to argue that reconciliation can be achieved in the short-term, because given the range of impediments to further reconciliation and the extent to which the adoption of the word genocide appears to be a polarizing issue there seems to be little room for further reconciliation in the near future.