ALARM BELLS ARE RINGING FOR THE ARMENIAN COMMUNITY IN TÜRKIYE

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Category: Opinions

By Melinda Andonyan, Istanbul, 26 February 2026

The number of Armenians in Türkiye has been gradually declining for a long time. This is no longer merely a statistic; it is a reality felt in everyday life. Young people leave the country for education and work, and many do not return. Birth rates are low. Economic anxieties are growing. In recent years, the increase in mixed Turkish–Armenian marriages has also become part of this picture. Of course, people fall in love and marry—this is the natural course of life. Yet because the community is already small, the demographic impact of these marriages is more visible. Children often grow up within the majority culture, may not attend Armenian schools, and may use the language less in daily life. As a result, their visibility diminishes along with their numbers.

Today, the vast majority of Armenians in Türkiye live in Istanbul. The spiritual heart of the community is the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople. More than a religious authority, the Patriarchate is where weddings are celebrated, children are baptized, and funerals are held. It also stands at the center of schools, foundations, and churches. In this sense, it represents not only faith but also identity and social solidarity.

As the community diminishes, maintaining this structure becomes more challenging. Armenian school classrooms are less attended than before, with some classes merged and a slight annual decrease in student numbers. Fewer young individuals speak Armenian as their native language, leading to a gradual weakening of the language as it becomes less heard and spoken. Some young people prefer to keep their identities low-profile to avoid the burden of visibility, and over time, this silent withdrawal erodes the sense of community and belonging.

At this point, mixed marriages become a decisive factor. When an Armenian and a Turk marry, the issue extends beyond the union of two individuals. Decisions about the language spoken at home, the religious ceremonies observed, and the schools children attend come into play. While the Patriarchate, churches, and schools are visible institutions, the most powerful forces sustaining language, cuisine, holidays, and prayer in daily life are mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers. A word whispered at home, a recipe passed down in the kitchen, rituals such as preparing the Easter table—these are not recorded in official histories, yet they keep identity alive. Although many families strive to balance two cultures, in practice, the dominant culture within the household often shapes the child's direction. In the long run, this contributes to the gradual thinning of the community.

There is also an economic dimension. Churches, foundations, and clergy all have expenses: salaries, maintenance, repairs, and restorations. As the community contracts, these costs are carried by fewer people. Wedding, baptism, and especially funeral expenses can become a heavy burden for some families.

Funerals, in particular, are a sensitive issue. No one wants to think about financial concerns at a time of deep grief. Yet some Armenian families with limited means struggle to cover funeral costs and

are forced to seek free or low-cost burial and transportation services from municipal authorities. This reality reveals both economic hardship and the limits of communal solidarity—because the most painful moments are also when solidarity is most severely tested.

A vicious cycle emerges:

The population decreases the economic base narrows the burden per person grows alienation deepens and the population declines even further.

This is the situation in Istanbul. The deeper silence, however, lies in Anatolia. In cities such as Van, Muş, Erzurum, Sivas, Kayseri, and Diyarbakır—once home to large Armenian populations—almost no community members remain today, a result of historical suffering. Church bells once rang in these cities, schools were open, and Armenian was spoken in the streets. Today, churches are closed, repurposed, or opened only once a year. Cemeteries remain, but visitors are few. The spaces still exist, yet there is no living presence to sustain them.



St. Giragos Armenian Church in Diyarbakır/Türkiye

When the silence of Anatolia combines with the shrinking presence in Istanbul, the issue ceases to be solely a minority concern; it becomes a question of the country's cultural diversity as a whole. Institutions may endure, and buildings may remain standing. But what truly matters is that these spaces are filled with people—that young voices pass through their doors, that the language is heard, and that traditions are lived rather than merely remembered.

In the end, it is not numbers alone that determine survival, but will. If a society wishes to carry itself into the future, it must preserve its identity not merely as a memory of the past, but as a living value of the present. And perhaps the most important question remains this:

Is a country enriched by its minority communities—or does it grow poorer as it loses them?

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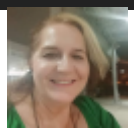


Melinda Andonyan was born in Istanbul-Türkiye in 1982. She is a Turkish-Armenian whose ancestors have lived in these lands for centuries. She graduated with honors from the Department of Teaching. She studied linguistics in Germany, on a scholarship from the German government. She has been actively involved in educational activities in various countries and worked as a teacher at private schools and universities in Türkiye. In addition to her teaching career, she has been an active translator and interpreter in four languages (English, German, Armenian, and Greek) since 2014. She first translated a Turkish book into English, called "Chaldee Letters and The Chaldeans," (written by Mgr. Francois Yakan) in 2014. This translation has been acclaimed worldwide and has found its place in libraries in many countries. Currently, she is translating books for many publishing companies and also writing articles and texts for various magazines and online platforms.

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The above symbol is the Armenian eternity sign. In Armenian: 'Հավերժության նշան'. Or 'Արեւախաչ', that means 'Sun Cross'. In Armenian culture, the eternity sign symbolized the concept of everlasting, celestial life. It is one of the most common symbols in Armenian architecture, carved on khachkars and on the walls of churches.

Comments



Nurnisa Erismis – 2026-02-28 16:35:44

Dear Melinda, Your article clearly and courageously lays out the demographic contraction of the Armenian community in Türkiye. This contraction is not merely a question of numbers; it directly concerns institutional sustainability, the presence of the language in daily life, and the continuity of communal consciousness. The thinning of school classrooms, the increasing burden on institutions, and the gradual disengagement of younger generations all point to a real fragility. This concern must be taken seriously. Mr. Edward Demiraiakian's comment, however, moves the discussion to another dimension. When we speak of a "shrinking Armenian community," we must ask whom we are referring to. The Christian Armenian community may indeed be decreasing in size; yet it is also an undeniable reality that there are people of Armenian origin in these lands who have lived—or continue to live—within different religious identities. This is not a competition of victimhood. Neither the historical trauma experienced by Christian Armenians can be minimized, nor can the experience of Muslim Armenians, many of whom were forced to conceal their identity be treated as secondary. These are not opposing memories, but different expressions of the same historical rupture. To make one visible while excluding the other would mean narrowing an already shrinking identity even further. Armenian identity in Türkiye has historically been institutionalized around the Church and communal structures; these institutions carry legal and historical boundaries that cannot simply be ignored. Yet the existence of individuals who, due to the traumatic processes of the twentieth century, underwent religious conversion or carried their Armenian identity silently across generations compels us to reconsider the boundaries of identity today. This is a difficult discussion, but it is no longer one that can be postponed. When boundaries are drawn too narrowly, the community contracts; when they are rendered entirely fluid, the content of identity may become blurred. The question, therefore, is not "who is more Armenian," but on what foundation and together with whom Armenian identity will be sustained. Demographic alarm and calls for inclusivity should not be seen as opposites, but as complementary aspects of the same concern. If we truly seek a future, we must both address the fragility of our institutions and courageously examine the mental thresholds we have constructed toward those who are historically part of this people. This conversation can no longer be deferred. For Keghart's readership, many of whom are deeply engaged with questions of memory, justice, and national continuity, the challenge is not abstract. It concerns how we define belonging, how we respond to historical rupture, and whether we are prepared to confront difficult questions within our own communal frameworks. The future of Armenian identity will not be shaped only by external pressures, but also by the intellectual and moral clarity with which we address these internal debates.



Edward Demiraiakian – 2026-02-27 23:50:16

I read the article above and was saddened and concerned by it. In a way I feel that we may be responsible in some way. Yes the Armenian community is shrinking, The Christian Armenian community is shrinking. However the Muslim Armenian community is Large and many in that community earn to belong. However, they are not accepted, denied, told that they are not Armenians. If we wish to retain anything of our history, we need to find a way. We can't continue to blame what happened to us on the Muslim Armenians. In a way, they are more victimized than us. Let us find a way to accept them. We accept Armenians of all denominations, including atheists, yet not Muslims. It's time to rethink.