

ARMENIANS AND KURDS

Posted on August 6, 2009 by Keghart



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By Ayse Gunaysu, [The Armenian Weekly](#), 5 August 5, 2009

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It is not a coincidence that more and more, informers have been reporting where they witnessed the burial of those who had been extrajudicially executed in southeast Turkey in the 1990's, and that people have been applying to human rights organizations and public prosecutors' offices for the excavation of such places, in search for their missing relatives' bodies. It's also not a coincidence that suspects of unsolved murders, including some retired military officers, are currently in jail, and some of them are also the activists or the organizers of violent anti-Armenian protests.

The start of a process which might lead to a peaceful solution of the Kurdish Question is vital for the democratization of Turkey. It is also necessary for eliminating the widespread culture of denialism in the country—the denial of even the actual existence of religious, ethnic, and cultural entities other

than the Muslim Turks, and their rights as equal citizens.

The Armenian and Kurdish Questions in Turkey have always been closely interconnected in a much-contradictory, even paradoxical manner. Kurdish tribal chieftains and local Kurdish people in many places directly took part in the Armenian Genocide, carrying out the murders and usurping Armenian property. Yet, Kurds soon saw that their diabolic collaboration wouldn't save them from falling victim to the same perpetrators, whom they knew from their previous experiences in the 1930's and 1940's. In his monumental book *Der verpasste Friede*, Hans-Lukas Kieser writes: "The bloody annihilation of the last Kurdish-Alevite autonomy in the name of bringing peace and civilization in 1938 was the completion of the internal conquest of Armenia and Kurdistan which had started a century ago."

It was in 1938 that the Kurdish resistance in the mountains of Dersim against the deportations—which surely meant inhumane conditions, starvation, and death on their way—was crushed with unprecedented atrocities in the Republican period. What Kieser calls "a hundred years of internal colonization" refers to the Ottoman army's campaigns into historic Kurdistan in the 1830's and 1840's, when Kurdish resistance was repressed with utmost violence. The internal colonialization also put an end to the hierarchical *modus vivendi* in the eastern vilayets (provinces) of the Ottoman Empire, where Armenians were more or less allowed security and a relative wellbeing under the protection of Kurdish principalities, to which they paid taxes in return. After that, the Armenians had to pay double taxes both to the Ottoman authorities and the Kurdish chieftains; as a result, their sufferings increased, and the hostilities and tensions between the Kurdish and Armenian population heightened. Playing a part in the hostility was the Ottoman authorities' successful manipulation of the local Kurdish chieftains and the Kurdish population in general, underlining the "brotherhood" of fellow Muslims as opposed to the Christian infidels; the authorities also elaborated the idea that a possible independent Armenian state in the region would be the end of the Kurdish existence there.

Then there was the visible difference between the socio-economic level of development of the local Kurdish and Armenian populations—the latter being well ahead of the former in every aspect, from education to all other manifestations of a much more civilized life, which triggered feelings of jealousy and greed on the part of the Kurds. As a result, although it was the ruling Young Turks who planned the Armenian Genocide and put their plan into effect through the state apparatus, it was the local Kurdish people in many places led by their chieftains who carried out the massacres. (On the other hand, it is a well-known truth that other Kurds, especially in the Dersim area, protected Armenians and Assyrians, refusing to turn them over to the Ottoman army and helping them to escape.)

Yet, collaborating with their Ottoman masters in exterminating Armenians did the Kurds no good. During the Kemalists' "War of Liberation," they were promised autonomy in return for their support to free Turkey from "foreigners," which included native Greek and Armenians as well. The promises

were never kept. The leaders of the young Republic went on with their Turkification project by means of extensive deportations and the resettlements of Kurds, just like their Ottoman predecessors. So during the Republican period, Kurdish resistance and uprisings followed one another, each being repressed with greater violence.

It's a tragic and painful fact—a fact that provides enormous learning points—that the Armenian Genocide played a part in the radicalization of the Kurds during and after the foundation of the Republic. Throughout their history, the Kurds were in one way or other in interaction with the Armenians. On the one hand, they felt threatened by the growing might of Armenians economically, socially, and politically—a fear fuelled by the government, which spread rumors about the Armenians' secret plans to establish their own independent state. On the other hand, the Armenians' strong awareness of their ethnic, religious, and cultural identity, as well as the political activity of the Armenian intelligentsia, inspired them. And after the genocide, the horrible collective memory of doing such injustice to the Armenians, of being their murderers and plunderers, haunted them. They sensed that they might well share the same fate with the Armenians, and that Armenians and Kurds were in fact the victim of the same mentality of statehood. Armenian leaders of the time were also aware of this highly complicated Kurdish reality.

So, no matter how it may sound paradoxical, it was not unexpected that only a couple of years after the genocide, during the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, the Armenian delegation headed by Boghos Nubar Pasha and the Kurdish leader Sharif Pasha joined forces and reached an agreement for the foundation of two independent states—that of Armenia and Kurdistan, in the eastern part of Turkey. After another couple of years, in 1927, following the foundation of the Turkish Republic, the short-lived Republic of Ararat formed during one of the Kurdish uprisings was led by the Kurdish Khoyboun society, which was supported by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF). An ARF leader, Vahakn Papazian, had participated in the founding congress of the society in Lebanon, hailing the meeting “as a symbol of the alliance between Armenian and Kurds” (*A People Without A Country*, G. Chaliand, A.R. Ghassemlou, M. Pallis, 1992) .

Naci Kutlay, in his book *Kurtler* (“The Kurds”) (Peri Yayinlari, Istanbul, 2002), refers to M.A. Hasratian, an Armenian historian specializing in Kurdish history in the Soviet Union, who wrote that at the ARF's April 1929 Congress, a number of decisions were taken to support the Kurdish struggle in “Turkish Armenia” on the grounds that it provided an obstacle for the resettlement of masses of Turkish population in the Armenian territories, undermined Turkish nationalism, and weakened the Turkish state, thus contributing to the creation of conditions for setting up a “free and united Armenia.”

My knowledge of Armenian-Kurdish relations is, admittedly, far from being adequate enough to give a complete summary of their histories. But from what I've heard and from what I've come across in various sources, I can see and deeply feel that the truth about the Armenians and Kurds—two

peoples who have suffered from the same project for an ethnically and religiously homogenous country—is too complicated for a simplistic and reductionist approach.

The peaceful solution of the Kurdish problem now in Turkey will pave the way for the defeat of denialism in every sense of the word—progress, no matter how small or slow it may be, towards the enlightenment of the minds and the healing of the injured conscience of many Turks, regarding their relation with Armenian sufferings, and with the part they (we) have played and still play in this suffering.

Previous article by Ayse Gunaysu:

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