

APPRAISING TURKISH-ARMENIAN RECONCILIATION

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On Nov 17, 2014, the e-zine Jadaliyya published an interview with Dr. Anny Bakalian conducted by Dr. Sinem Adar titled "[Armenian Diaspora Tourism in Turkey](#)."

This conversation between a Turkish and Armenian academic seems designed to introduce Muslim audiences to the history and experience of Western Armenians before and after 1915. One aspect of the interview appears to be to defuse enmity between Turks and Armenians by showing how their ancestors allegedly shared a common heritage prior to the Genocide.

Interviewee Bakalian recounts her family history in Western Armenia and Cilicia; her participation in pilgrimages to these lands; and answers questions about her thoughts and experiences as a descendant of Armenian exiles. Bakalian's comments will undoubtedly inform Muslim readers about Armenian history.

Intellectual exchanges such as this are welcome, but they also present problems. The successful implementation of Turkish-Armenian reconciliation seems to require that both sides presuppose common historical and cultural attributes that are not necessarily accurate or complete. Indeed, this interview at times risks equalizing the culpability of Armenians and Turks for antagonisms existing before and after the Armenian Genocide. A few instances that point to this include the following comments from Bakalian:

- *That many Armenians in 19th century Cilicia and parts of W. Armenia spoke Turkish as their 'mother tongue.'* Turkish may have been the Lingua Franca, given that occupied peoples were using the dominant, official language of the Turkish Empire, but to call it the mother tongue of the Armenians is inaccurate and disingenuous.
- *That Armenians had a "shared culture" with Turks that included cuisine, music and Khoja stories.* Had Bakalian mentioned that many indigenous traditions were appropriated or destroyed by centuries of harsh Turkish occupation, this would render the picture in a different light...that of Armenian tourists witnessing the co-optation and weakening of their suppressed culture.
- *That Armenians from Lebanon in the 1980s wishing to travel to Western Armenia would have encountered the refusal of a Turkish visa because The Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) was murdering Turkish diplomats.* Were all Lebanese Armenians wishing to travel refused a Turkish visa? Was the mention of ASALA in the interview done to equalize purported "shared pain" between Turks and Armenians, without mentioning that the assassination of diplomats is an inevitable tactic of the disenfranchised and dispossessed? Was it necessary for Bakalian to refer to a Tashnag ancestor and his descendant as "defiant" -- which smack of the derogative terms used to justify the Turkish narrative that Armenian revolts were responsible for the Genocide?
- *That "some Armenians really want an apology from the Turkish government . Some people would*

be happy to receive a personal expression of regret." While this reflects Bakalian's personal opinion, it does not represent a position to which the entire global Armenian community adheres, nor does an apology suffice or portend a larger political solution. To her credit, Bakalian ends the interview by saying that "if the Turkish citizens lobby their government to change the policy of genocide denial, they may eventually achieve this. Ultimately, the onus is on the Turkish people, beginning with the intelligentsia." Unfortunately, Bakalian stops at governmental acknowledgment as a proposed final solution.

· *That "witnessing the villages, towns, and cities of their parents, grandparents, and great grandparents reconnects travelers with their roots and heals displacement. The trip is psychologically therapeutic not only for the travelers, but also for Diaspora Armenians back home. When the pilgrims return to their everyday lives, they share their experiences and impressions with their family, friends, and community. While family stories of Turkish atrocities are not forgotten, the new narratives offer the promise of closure."* Many Armenians do not agree with Bakalian's opinion that tourism to occupied Western Armenia is the "healing" solution for exiled Armenians and their descendants. In fact, some might consider traveling to areas cleansed of Armenians and their culture a form of re-traumatization, especially when Turkish state policy is still one of full-blown denial.

There have been, in the last 20 years, a number of misconceptions inherent in the Turkish-Armenian reconciliation process. Reconciliation begs the question of whether and under which circumstances a victim group with little support from the international community should: engage with an unrepentant perpetrating nation; share responsibility for their victimization in exchange for dialogue; and if the process puts the appropriately greater onus on the dominant perpetrator group.

This interview became a springboard for our compiling a list of misconceptions, presented below.

Ten Key Presuppositions of Turkish-Armenian "Reconciliation"

- 1) **That reconciliation rectifies an estrangement between peoples who were once co-equal citizens and good friends residing within a tolerant Ottoman Empire.** False. Armenians were generally second-class citizens in an oppressive environment.
- 2) **That both peoples are equally responsible for their rift, for what caused and perpetuates it, for establishing a peaceful resolution, and have equal power to do so.** False. Turkey was the perpetrating state; Armenians were the victims. The power asymmetry still holds today.
- 3) **That cultural exchanges to 'bridge misunderstanding' can overcome historic hostility; such exchanges are enough to help two sides reach an equitable solution to their problems; and if exchanges cannot lead to restorative justice, they could minimize or supplant it.** False. There are real political issues that separate Turkey and Armenia: Turkey's closure of the border, Turkey's attempts to interfere in the Artsakh/Karabagh issue, and Turkey's pan-Turkist ambitions to expand to the East.

- 4) **That apologies by Turks in regard to the Armenian Genocide – individually, collectively or on a government level -- may speak for all concerned and will finally resolve the problem.** False, as financial and territorial reparations are also necessary to completely make amends for the unprecedented act of genocide committed.
- 5) **That it is up to Armenians to work hand-in-hand with Turks to educate and transform Turkish society (whether this ultimately helps the Armenian Cause or not) and that only such transformed Turks from within Turkey (rather than international pressure upon Turkey) can establish lasting peace with Armenians.** False. Armenians should not be placed in the position of being the Turks' psychiatrists.
- 6) **That interminable exchanges, dialogue and dissection of history should take the place of Armenian political activism for reparations and restoration or, at the very least, should persuade political entities to neutralize reparations efforts.** False. Dialogue in perpetuity could indefinitely delay and defuse restorative justice.
- 7) **That the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border is not being pursued to satisfy the political ambitions of the West, but rather, is being pursued because it is solely beneficial to the parties involved.** False. The West has much to gain by an opened border, including the East-West transport of Western-controlled Central Asian energy resources and political and military penetration by NATO. Incentives presented to Turks include improving their international image and boosting the impoverished Turkish economy. For Armenians, besides some unproven economic gains, purported incentives are that simply visiting Western Armenia will, in and of itself, satisfy and give closure to those who carry genocide trauma and the desire to permanently return to W. Armenia. This may, in fact, complete the act of genocide.
- 8) **That motives for reconciliation are the same among Turks and Armenians.** False. Some Turks may wish to correct historic wrongs. Others wish to achieve economic gain; improve a tarnished image; build democracy in their own nation; and neutralize the reparations movement. Some Armenians may truly seek restorative justice. Others wish to obtain career opportunities and advancement, access to power and personal fame.
- 9) **That the majority of Turks of today are liberal thinkers and entirely unlike the Turks of the past. And that the reconciliation movement is widespread and has great public support.** False. The intellectual class that recognizes the Armenian Genocide makes up a small percentage of the Turkish population. The recent, racially motivated Turkic assassinations of Armenians such as Hrant Dink, Sultan Aykar, Marissa Kucuk, Sevan Balikji and Gurgen Makaryan are still fresh, as are the invasions of Kessab and the bombing of the Der Zor Memorial. The reconciliation movement is not extensive and does not have widespread public support. The same group of individuals are participating in the reconciliation process again and again, only sometimes with their identities concealed.

10) That so much has changed in the past 100 years and that, aside from a hostile, paranoid Armenian Diaspora, Turkey is of no particular threat to Armenia. That those Armenians who question the asymmetry of the Turkish-Armenian reconciliation process are fanatics who harbor hatred for Turks, do not wish to see progress, and are preventing Armenia from making peace with Turkey. False. Those who point out the power asymmetry between Turkey and Armenians should not be silenced or marginalized. Diaspora Armenians are looked upon as hostile interventionists who will spoil Turkish-Armenian initiatives. In truth, the Diaspora represents the direct outcome of the genocidal process and the main aggrieved party who remains stateless and without reparation or restitution.

We urge those who wish to see meaningful dialogue between Turks and Armenians to consider the points above. On the eve of the Armenian Genocide Centennial and as reconciliation initiatives proliferate, every Armenian must ask him or herself the following: "Do I believe that the Armenians should abandon the dream of returning to the indigenous lands and properties stolen from Armenians, or should Armenians cherish their dream the way Martin Luther King, Jr. did, and for which he paid with his life? His followers have not given up that dream despite all of the hardships and ridicule.

Let us assume that there are high-minded Armenians who are invested in the "reconciliation" process as a means of restoring the lost homeland of the Armenians and seek a way to establish a foothold in Western Armenia. If this is so, they must take into account that today's [Assyrians](#) invited to repurchase and resettle into their ancestral properties in their historic homeland, confiscated during the (still-ongoing) Genocide, are once again being ousted from "modern" Turkey.

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