

# HISTORIAN RESPONDS TO TURKEY'S DAVUTOGLU

*Posted on August 19, 2014 by Keghart*



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## COMMENTARY ON FM DAVUTOĞLU'S TPQ ARTICLE ON THE ARMENIAN ISSUE

By Gerard J. Libaridian, [Turkish Policy Quarterly](#), 16 July 2014

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### **Introduction**

It is not often that a minister of foreign affairs of an important country who takes part in the formulation of policies and has the responsibility of implementing them will dare to reveal the logic behind his government's policy on a sensitive matter. This is what Mr. Ahmet Davutoğlu has done recently in his article, Turkish-Armenian Relations: Is a "Just Memory" Possible?

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### **Introduction**

It is not often that a minister of foreign affairs of an important country who takes part in the formulation of policies and has the responsibility of implementing them will dare to reveal the logic behind his government's policy on a sensitive matter. This is what Mr. Ahmet Davutoğlu has done recently in his article, Turkish-Armenian Relations: Is a "Just Memory" Possible?

Thus, we are most thankful to Mr. Ahmet Davutoğlu for this TPQ article discussing the reasoning behind the position of the Turkish government on what is referred to by some as "1915," the "Armenian issue," or by other euphemisms. The Minister's article, along with the 23 April 2014 statement by Prime Minister Mr. Recep Erdoğan on the same subject and written in the same spirit, represent the thinking of the current Turkish government on how to deal with Turkish-Armenian relations, including what most experts know as the Genocide of the Armenians.

As was the case with the Prime Minister's statement, I ardently wish to think that, above all, these documents constitute invitations for a public discussion of Turkey's understanding of and policy on the issue; in a sense, a dialogue that may engage anyone who has an interest in the policy aspect or historical dimension of the issue.

Giving the benefit of the doubt to Mr. Davutoğlu's motivation in publishing his thoughts, I have taken the liberty of analyzing his text and pointing out some problem areas, which, I hope, the Minister will view as graciously as he is known to do when confronted with disagreements.

The article has two parts. The first is a theoretical treatment of the rise of nations. The second part has many segments: the application of that theory in the case of the Armenian people, a characterization of what happened in 1915 and how to think about it, Turkey's position regarding state-to-state relations and why the 2009 Protocols have not moved forward, and a plea for "just memory."

Even before we engage in the substance of the article, two questions arise. (1) How should we read this article? Is it a treatise on history? A political scientist's analysis of an uncomfortable situation? Or the intellectual meanderings of a former social scientist now burdened with a minister's position? (2) What question is the Minister trying to answer? How to resolve Armenia/Turkey state-to-state relations? Relations between Diasporan Armenian organizations and communities and the Turkish state, including the international campaign for the recognition of the

Armenian Genocide? Relations between Turkish and Armenian communities outside of Turkey? Considering the near impossibility of resolving all these issues at once, a fact I suspect the Minister is aware of, it is possible that there is yet another explanation for the structure of the article and its many components.

I hope the following will help in understanding the complexity of these issues, provide possible answers to these questions, and move the debate forward.

### ***Concepts and Historicity***

In the first part of the article, the author provides a theoretical framework for the rise of nations; the discussion is quite erudite even if somewhat obtuse for readers who are not steeped in intellectual controversies such as: Is the nation an old concept or a new one, a product of print capitalism and involvement of intellectuals and information to masses, in other words, an intellectual construct that serves specific, not so readily-idealized purposes. This first, theoretical part is formulated in a manner that has a particular case in mind, the Armenians, and takes too much for granted. It is not my intention to engage in an argument in this theoretical segment in detail. But it is necessary to point out some issues regarding the theoretical grounding for the Minister's argument in the rest of the article.

1. The Minister's article offers a theoretical framework for the interpretation of the Armenian issue

that is based on the "construction of nationalism" concept laid out in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. But the author does not apply the same analytical tool to the history of the Turkish nation as he does to the Armenian one. In fact, the Turkish nation is absent from his narrative. He takes the Turkish nation, constructed recently, for granted; and he declares the Armenian nation—existing continuously at least for two millennia, albeit changing and redefining itself, but always on most of its historical homeland until 1915— as a new construct.

2. As a social scientist willing to use recent theories on nationalism, the Minister does not cite counterarguments to Anderson's theory, which is understandable. But he also does not seem to be aware of the modifications Anderson himself brought to his own approach subsequent to his original book. There were modifications, which attempted to accommodate historical realities that did not conform to his original, purist theory.

3. It is antihistorical to treat the Armenian issue, or any issue for that matter, as if time and history began with the Ottoman Empire. There was a world before and outside the Ottoman Empire, and that world included an Armenian people, an Armenian identity, and Armenian states in a good part of what is today Turkey, long before the word Turk appeared anywhere in those territories. The heavy theoretical argumentation on the rise of nations is designed, nonetheless, to make the second part—the one that speaks of the Armenian nation almost as a new event and as an accident of history—seem more scientific than is actually the case. The author seems to be saying that by grounding his arguments in theory, everything else he says must be seen as an application of a universal and universally accepted truth. The nation as a recent construct is quite a convenient perspective for those who wish to deny the pre-Ottoman history of Armenians and others, and thus avoid a discussion of the essence of empire.

Theory is critical for our thought processes, but it is often aimed at giving a text more gravitas than evidence. The marketplace of ideas is full of theories and these theories trip over each other, especially when their conceivers rethink and revise them. Even in the physical world theories are revised and rethought; that is why they are called theories. I am not aware of any theory in the social sciences that is both precise enough and can explain all relevant situations.

Here theory, or a shadow of it, is used to deny Armenians their past; it seems the Minister has fallen prey to the propaganda spread by previous Turkish governments and their official court historians that the past of Armenians can be sacrificed to the altar of Ottoman sanctity and, by extension, Turkish nationalism today.

As indicated above, the second part of the article has a number of segments. The segment which tries to set the historical record straight from the author's point of view is based on antihistorical premises and assumptions.

1. It is antihistorical to consider the interests of the Ottoman Empire as sacrosanct. Empires are built on conquest, violence, and the subjugation of others. Their borders have no legitimacy and are

maintained through violence. Yet, except for the "relocations" of Armenians by the Ittihad, the author seems to think all was great in the Ottoman Empire, whatever that entailed over the centuries. What is lacking is the critical attitude toward the subject of study. Otherwise the historian is identifying himself with the empire and is no longer a historian; and as a politician he thus must assume responsibility for the policies of the empire.

2. To reduce 500 years of imperial domination over the Armenian people –with all that such imperial rule implies– to the fate of a few Armenian names and "contributions" Armenians made to Ottoman culture, constitutes the height of antihistorical, if not neo-imperial thinking. The fact that the Ottoman state employed some of the most talented Armenians in its bureaucracy cannot possibly signal 500 years of benevolence toward the whole of the Armenian people throughout the Ottoman Empire. That is the equivalent of a southerner in the U.S. who claimed "my best servant is a black man," or a modern, educated Turk in Istanbul who does not even wish to question the official state narrative on the "Armenian issue" –since he thinks he has nothing against Armenians– because, he would argue, "my baker is Hagop, the Armenian."

3. Ottoman history and its treatment of its subject peoples cannot possibly be reduced to the individual benevolence of sultans, pashas, and beys toward individual Armenians. This ignores the systemic problems that made Armenians second class subjects at best, and victims of massacres at worst, even before 1915. There is no theory of nationalism or of any "ism" that can justify ignoring, as does the author in this article, the *devşirme*–the collection of children from Christian families for forced service in state institutions, including the Ottoman army– or the unequal treatment of subjects in courts, in taxation, and in participation in state institutions.

4. How can we explain the fact that when reconstructing history, the author remembers the rise of nationalism among Christian peoples subject to the Ottoman Empire but not that of Albanians, Arabs and Kurds, who happen to be Muslim and who also rejected Ottoman rule? Such omission, it seems, makes it possible to blame Christian subjects for the demise of the empire, consonant with the conspiracy theory quite common among some historians: blame everyone but yourself for the end of the Empire, a critical view of the Ottoman state as an empire being considered a taboo.

5. The author of the article characterizes what happened in 1915 as "relocations," which is an easier crime to admit to than "deportations and massacres," a term often used by others who are not inclined to characterize the Ittihad policies as genocide or genocidal. It is against my policy to try to convince anyone that what happened was genocide; I find that insulting. But I must also recognize the deep seated unwillingness by many –for good and not so valid reasons– to face the reality of what happened in 1915 and the refusal to recognize that there is no better word to characterize what happened than the word genocide. Otherwise it is hard to explain why scholars whose integrity is not in question end up with highly questionable methods of inquiry.

One should note, finally, that in this article the Minister fails to condemn even the "relocations," a

condemnation which he had reportedly offered when flying to Yerevan earlier. Neither the Minister nor his ministry ever denied having made such a condemnation as reported in the Turkish press. Maybe one should not be surprised, since the manner in which these relocations eventually metamorphose into "war and conflict," a most passive description for the most violent events in history: it appears that war and conflict happen, just as rain and thunderstorms do, without any human intervention. No government, party or institution should be blamed for them, and no one should be held responsible for them.

Before we review the last segment of the article that deals with the present and the future, I must address one particular element, where the Minister cites one of my articles to substantiate his argument that Armenian identity was a late construction. In that article, I had argued that Armenians in Istanbul perceived their political agenda and their concerns differently than Armenians living in the provinces, especially in the rural areas. Yet the Minister has confused different facets of identity derived from different socio-economic circumstances with different ethnicities that were, in his rendering, forged into a new Armenian nation late in history.

Equally significant is the Minister's lack of interest in the basic argument in my article: why were there such differences between the agendas of Armenians in Istanbul versus the provinces? A fair reading of that article or any other piece that I have written on the subject will indicate that the Ottoman administration had failed to provide for the minimal well-being and security of Armenians in the provinces, leading them to have a different and more evolving self-image and an agenda different from those who were relatively better off in Istanbul or major cities. These were not two different tribes, clans, ethnicities, peoples or nations. If nothing else, the Ottoman state itself said that they were the same people when it brought all of them under the millet system. Armenians faced different challenges and sometimes responded differently to these challenges.

Regardless, the Minister's attention to my writings –and I assume to the writings of many others who have done serious work on the subject– is much appreciated. Analyzing all of the author's assertions is an impossible task in this forum. So let us take a few specific and characteristic moments from the Minister's article, limiting it to some that have been highlighted in the article

### ***On Armenian Identity***

"The Ottoman order did not suppress Armenian identity; on the contrary it guaranteed its existence by including it in the melting pot and integrating it within official structures," argues Mr. Davutoğlu.

Leaving aside the fact that at the end, the Ottoman Empire annihilated Armenians, especially those in Anatolia –whether female or male, rich or poor, farmer, teacher or merchant, baby or elderly– the statement is faulty on a number of grounds. By consolidating the "millet system," the Ottoman Empire raised religious identity above Armenian political identity, a process started by the Seljuks and pursued actively by the Mongol occupiers. An Armenian people with a long history of statehood was reduced to a religious community. That is not a guarantor of an Armenian identity. The Minister's

definition of identity is that of a subjugated people, redefined by the imperial ruler. But in making this argument, he is also assuming an Armenian identity before the Ottoman occupation, that which his theoretical argument denies.

It is difficult to imagine a "shared history" that does not take into consideration the great inequality of agency that existed. A shared history does indeed exist, but it is not a history of equals between the Ottoman imperial state and its Armenian subjects. Those are two very different entities.

The concept of the Ottoman Empire as a "melting pot" is altogether inappropriate in a state which, by definition, discriminated against non-Muslims. Had the empire been a melting pot, there would not have been so many "communities," peoples, and ethnic groups trying to escape it. The author's model is based on the idealized view of the Ottoman Empire where it regards the continued existence of Armenians until 1915 as a favor, not a right of Armenians, and suggests that Armenians then and today should have been satisfied with the favor the Ottoman Empire granted them until 1915. The use of the term "melting pot" may be aimed at suggesting a model similar to the view of the U.S. –which was not even true for the U.S.– when one considers the status of blacks, Asians, and others when the concept had currency in the 1950s and 1960s.

### ***On the Role of History in the Matter of Despising Each Other***

"When a retrospective understanding of history centered upon the relocation is adapted, the emergence of two collective understandings that despise one another is inevitable," argues the author.

This is a curious statement as it does much more than explain the emergence of opposite narratives. The most important achievement of this sentence is the word "relocation."

However one wishes to characterize the policies of the Ottoman state, these policies brought to an end not only the lives of a large number of peoples who had nothing to do with war, but also the existence of a people on its historical homeland. That "relocation" determined the future of a whole nation and the Minister thinks the survivors and their children and grandchildren should be thinking about the Ottoman Armenian architect who built palaces for the Sultan and other Armenian subjects whose skills the sultans and Pashas could not do without.

To think that "despising" each other is the fault of the victim's focus on "relocations" is to indicate that the Minister has yet to understand two things: first, he has not understood the depth of the reasons why one despised the other. Second, the Minister does not want to think or to discuss the role of the ardent and passionate denialist policy of the Turkish state for almost a century in the process of "despising".

The policies of the Ottoman government, the position of the Republic of Turkey regarding those Ottoman policies for almost a century now, and what Turkish citizens are taught in schools are irrelevant, seems to assert Mr. Davutoğlu. It is the victim's faulty memory that is in question.

## ***The Need for Common Ground***

"Common ground must be found between Turks and Armenians whether it is in Los Angeles, Paris, Moscow, or elsewhere," the Minister asserts.

One can understand and appreciate the humanitarian impulse behind this assertion. There have already been dozens of efforts launched to foster Armenian-Turkish relations in Turkey and Armenia, as well as abroad: scholars, journalists, intellectuals, businessmen, artists and other professionals have reached out to each other. Civil society is farther ahead than is assumed.

Yet we know that there are limitations on what they can achieve. More importantly, the author fails to provide a workable path for the search for that all-encompassing common ground. That common ground can certainly not be found by a unilateral decision of one side.

### ***A Matter of Diasporas***

"We view all of the communities that emigrated from Anatolia as our diaspora, not just the Turks living abroad," says the author.

Here, "1915" is further metamorphosed. Within the single article, it is first presented as "relocations," then it is transformed to "emigration," and finally to "war and conflict."

This generous sounding offer has the feel of a genuinely constructive attitude. The problem is that it is not clear to what problem this is an answer to. Do the children, grandchildren and great children of the survivors consider themselves "emigrants?" The Minister may be able to reduce them to regular immigrants, in the same category as those Turkish citizens who left Turkey to find labor in Europe and to then build a whole castle on the sand as a solution, but the sands Armenians know is that of Der Zor, not that of the Riviera.

There is one more concept proposed by the author that I would like to comment on, a concept that is also in the title of his article, that of "just memory".

### ***"Just Memory"***

Together, the concepts "just" and "memory" have a high and fair sounding appeal; however the juxtaposition of these two words is more revealing than the author suspects. The word "just" conjures a moral category, while memory refers to a fallible, though important, category of knowledge regarding the past. Neither of the

words in that expression –nor the article in general– offer precision. That imprecision and vagueness is essential to the problem that can be seen in the argument. Here, moral and social categories are intertwined in order to bypass the critical essence of the problem: history. Justice is a moral category; memory is a collective memory that is passed down through families and taught in schools. The latter is susceptible to manipulation by governments; the first is less constrained, although it can be self-censored.

Essentially, Mr. Davutoglu argues that in order for reconciliation to be reached, Armenians need to adjust their memory by considering all the good times they had while they were subjects of the Ottoman Empire.

The problem, then, lies with Armenians and their memory, according to the author. Thus, Armenians, having lost more than half their numbers and their homeland, are asked to change their collective memory; they are asked to accept the Minister's version of that history that reduces massacres and deportations to "emigration" and, finally, to "war and conflict." Once this metamorphosis is accomplished and the responsibility for genocide dissipates into thin air, then it must seem to the Minister that what he is asking is not too much.

The fact is that in so doing, the Minister appears to be negotiating with himself. That is, he is redefining the problem for Armenians by revising history and then arguing that Armenians could make that last adjustment.

The Minister thinks he is solving his problem and the problem of the Turkish state. Whether his solution is a realistic one or not, he certainly is not solving what Armenians consider to be the problem. And the problem for the Turkish government is the avoidance of the term genocide. The last "Ottoman" rulers –the Ittihad ve Terakki party that were responsible for the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire– erased the Armenian people from its historical habitat. Today's Turkish leaders want to erase from the minds of surviving Armenians their memory and their history, especially the memory of that first erasure, a genocide by any definition. What is being attempted here is the new conquest, the conquest of memory. Turkish leaders seem to be disappointed that the victor in this case was unable to dictate the proverbial hegemony over memory and history. This article constitutes yet another attempt –eventually as futile as the one preceding it– to avoid the word genocide as it applies to 1915 and to Ottoman policy toward Armenians during the First World War.

The author is expecting Armenians to solve the problem that Turkey is facing. And what has the Republic of Turkey done for Armenians and for what was done to them to deserve such magnanimous treatment? And for whom would this adjustment be "just?"

I am writing this commentary not only as a historian who specializes in Ottoman Armenian history but also as the main official representing Armenia and responsible for negotiations aimed at the normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia from 1992 through 1997. At the time, we had a position that was based on the mutual interests of both countries as neighbors who could start a new page in their history for the sake of peace and security. We had no preconditions for the establishment of normal relations between the two, despite some opposition in Armenia and a wider one in the Diaspora. We did not adjust our memory, but instead placed state and regional interests above that memory for the sake of our peoples. We were sure once a spirit of confidence followed the ravages of the past and the ravages of memory, we could all deal with history. In one word, we separated the historical issue from that of state-to-state relations, and did not make the recognition

of the Genocide as a precondition to the normalization of relations between the two states. That was a more dignified, even if costlier, way to deal with the disparities in memory than what the Minister offers. I must add that although more vociferous about the recognition of the Genocide, the two subsequent administrations to ours have maintained the same basic position.

Regardless, Turkey was not ready to reciprocate with a corresponding bold step to make a move forward possible. In April 1993, just as we were closing in on a draft protocol for the establishment of normal relations between the two countries, Turkey ended up linking the normalization of relations with Armenia to developments in the Karabakh conflict.

Mr. Davutoğlu and Mr. Erdoğan are asking Armenians to sacrifice their history and current interests in order to create a "just memory" and bring about reconciliation. Yet, a powerful state like Turkey is unable to make any concession that matters to Armenians or to Armenia. The present government of Turkey has continued the policy of its predecessors in adopting a "Turkishness" based policy toward the Karabakh problem. Turkish governments in the past failed to condemn the Azerbaijani bombings in 1991-92 of Armenian villages and towns in Karabakh and have supported Azerbaijani intransigence. What's more, Baku has relied on Ankara's unconditional support to maintain its unyielding position in the negotiation process. The current administration in Ankara has continued those policies and maintains the linkage between the Karabakh issue and the normalization of relations between Armenia and Turkey as did earlier administrations. One can appreciate the difficulties in Turkey's current domestic problems and its increased dependence on Azerbaijani investments in the country. But Armenians should not be asked to resolve Turkey problems, domestic or international.

If Armenians are being asked to make the ostensible good times they had under Ottoman rule to balance their memory and make reconciliation possible, why is it that a powerful state like Turkey cannot remember those same good times and for the sake of these good old times normalize relations with Armenia unconditionally, as Armenia has done, instead of focusing on one episode of what would be called "war and conflict" Armenia has with Azerbaijan?

I am also the author who has criticized Diaspora Armenians for having turned the memory of the Genocide into a principle of community organization and of legitimization of power in order to produce a more vibrant culture. Yet, I cannot expect Diaspora Armenians to relativize what happened to their people when it comes to relations with the Turkish state when that Turkish state seems to continue the path of engineering memory instead of respecting it. It seems that in doing so the Turkish state is failing to appreciate the depth of hurt and insult when they try to teach

Armenians lessons in history, in addition to the fatal blow to their history that was inflicted beginning in 1915.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

There is no doubt that the Minister's recognition of Ittihad leaders' policies, however defined and

characterized, and by extension the official words of the Prime Minister, represent a major breakthrough. But these courageous and appreciated words will acquire their full significance only when (1) the original acts they are condemning are not minimized, and (2) the words are followed by actions that mitigate the original act and give reason to Armenians not to "despise."

Earlier I asked the question: What problem is the Minister trying to resolve? Considering all the problems in his account of history and other analysis, it is clear that he has not really addressed the problems in history, in memory, in the present and in the future. In trying to resolve all problems with one answer, he has ended up resolving none, despite his best efforts.

I reiterate my appreciation of his statement and that of the Prime Minister. It marks for me a significant beginning of a dialogue that must continue in different forums and venues. What I can point out at this time is the following: The Minister has made great headway compared to what his predecessors have done. But while negotiating Turkish politics with his predecessors, he is also assuming that he is also negotiating with Armenians. We are far from having a sense that the Minister fully understands the position of the "Armenian" side. The first rule of successful negotiations, as Mr. Davutoğlu must appreciate, is to understand the position of the opponent, even as one disagrees with them. Let us agree on at least one thing: together with the Prime Minister's statement, this article could constitute the opening of a dialogue on a new level.

