

# IDENTITY AND ISLAMIZED ARMENIANS

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**Laurence Ritter**, Doctor in Sociology, [Repair](#), 8 June 2016

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In addition to the timid opening of Turkey between 2005-2012, another factor also explains why this subject is now better known beyond the small Armenian community in Istanbul. Those Armenians who had managed not only to survive but to maintain themselves in their villages were forced, like Kurds, to flee to the large Turkish urban centers, especially to Istanbul, as the repression against Kurdish rebels of the PKK intensified. Those who found themselves in Istanbul then connected with the Armenian community. Being Kurdish or Turkish-speaking, many are still today unable to prove their Armenian ancestry.

Hrant Dink, born in Malatya, strongly contributed through *Agos* to raising awareness of the issue, a disturbing development for the negationist Turkish state but also to a certain extent for Armenians in the Diaspora and in Armenia as well as for the Istanbul community.

Dink's wife, Rakel, is a member of one of these "hidden Armenians", a phrase which means they never converted. They were identified by "missionaries" in the 1960s and '70s who were sent to look for Armenians stranded in Anatolia. Those "missions", known to a few Armenians in Istanbul, were organized by Patriarch Shnork Galoustian, a native of Yozgat, who had known since the beginning of the '60s that many "vanished" Armenians had survived. Other Armenians from Istanbul joined the group but, at least in the eyes of the Patriarchate, the instruction was to only account for Armenians who had never converted to Islam – this in order to prevent any potential accusation of proselytizing by the Turkish authorities. Many families were thus identified, including Rakel Dink's, and were

offered to have their children sent to Istanbul to be educated in Armenian schools. The idea was then to send them back to their provinces. But mounting suppression of the PKK, as well as the under-development of Eastern Anatolia caused families to regroup in Istanbul rather than return to unsafe villages. Besides, from the 1980s on, many other families came on their own after the missions were terminated by the 1980 military coup and their main organizers arrested and tortured.

### **Difficult naming and classification**

In Istanbul some of those Armenians who had remained Christian, could be baptized by the Patriarchate, a *sine qua non* condition to be recognized as Armenians, as members of the Armenian Apostolic Church, by the Turkish law. Indeed, the Armenian minority has no legal existence in modern Turkey other than as a religious community, no different than in the Ottoman Empire. The stance of the Istanbul Patriarchate is unchanged: any person wishing to be recognized as Armenian is requested to take catechism lessons, then go through the name-changing process with Turkish registration authorities, and only then can the Church baptize them and consider them part of the community. Such a process was discouraging to many, and some preferred to be baptized in Echmiadzin, Armenia: the Armenian Mother See or the Diaspora do not have the same constraints as the Patriarchate of Constantinople. But in both cases, the question of compulsory baptism raises the issue of connecting Armenian-ness to Christianity, and more specifically to belonging to the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Most important when looking at the "Armenians of silence", the descendants of survivors hidden in the Eastern territories as well as today's Turkey's big cities, one must distinguish several cases which cannot cover all the various realities of identity – or rather identities – encountered.

Drawing from documented cases, it is possible to make out several configurations:

- Armenians who have always remained endogamous and preserved some Christian practices and were never converted to Islam.
- Those who, although remaining endogamous, were converted, either along the generations or right after the genocide but have preserved the awareness of their Armenian belonging. It is in that sub-group that claims to Armenian identity is most vocal at the moment, on the part of third- or fourth-generation descendants.
- Those who did not remain endogamous are most often descendants of the women and young women who were converted and kidnapped at the time of the genocide. Those are the cases documented by writer Fethye Çetin, but also in such families with complicated stories, individuals who undertake a search for the reality of their origins. Nothing has survived of the Armenian identity but it doesn't mean that the discovery, often disturbing because it has been silenced for so long through generations until recent times, will not lead descendants to speak out and find ways of recapturing their identity. Such steps are often very poorly accepted by Turks or Kurds, as well as the Armenian community of Istanbul.

~~This attempt to define groups should not obscure the important fact that hidden Armenians –~~ namely the first two categories – as well as those who are descendants, are therefore all categorized as “crypto-Armenians” in Turkey and that the phrase “remains of the sword” is still widely used, and in a very derogatory manner. Turks and Kurds living in the villages of Eastern Anatolia perceive such individuals as marked by the strict separation between Muslim space and that of others. Thus, the phrases in use do not describe family destinies and, in turn, these groups also make distinctions. For instance, in the Sasun province, a man who has remained Christian introduces us to a cousin in a formerly Armenian village, a village in which a church is left. He talks to her in the local Armenian dialect then tells us, “She married a Muslim. To us, she’s no longer one of ours.” It remains difficult in this case to know whether he is a Kurd or an Islamized Armenian. But for this man belonging to the group has been broken – whereas in remote villages, Islamized Armenians are still often viewed as “*Giaours*” – meaning infidels.

More revealingly, in a family from Adiyaman, the whole generation of Bedros, a man in his fifties, goes to the Syriac church since it reopened, and 70 percent or 80 percent of those meeting at the Sunday service are Armenian. Bedros's wife explains: “I am from Malatya. My father always kept his Bible, but at the same time he always went to the mosque, whereas I only go to church....” The youngest in this micro-community explain that they have no idea what it means to be Armenian. Going to this Syriac church is a sort of expression of belonging to Christianity but, to them, the references underlying that sense of belonging are lacking – above all the language but also the history, the customs, and traditions. Although the memory of the massacres has been passed down those endogamous families, the identity itself is a legacy passed on in bits and pieces.

### **Mirror image of the Diaspora?**

Much more than the “degree” of Islamization, this acculturation is the most striking feature of these people and it raises key questions: are some of these families very different from the established Diaspora? A hundred years after the Genocide, how do you only assess the real number of Armenians throughout the world? What is passed on within the Diaspora? From the 1920s on, the Diaspora has been able to recreate its own spaces, churches, political parties, and associations, and has played a major role for all those who came together in particular neighborhoods where that identity has left its mark on the first exiled generations. Later on, the movements of the 1970s and '80s contributed to the “awakening” of those communities, particularly in France. However, the personal itineraries within Armenian families of Marseilles, Lyon or Fresno are often diverse.

We can see that the question of “Islamized” Armenians is similar to the problem of defining the Diaspora Armenian's sense of belonging. In our eyes, beyond what cements any identity, in an age when an independent Armenia exists, Armenian can no longer define themselves solely by what has forged diasporas throughout the world after the genocide. And the Republic of Armenia may not be the gravity center of that Diaspora either. In order to continue to exist, the Diaspora must reinvent itself – it must keep redefining itself, and not solely within the frameworks inherited from how the

last three generations of Diaspora.

We can see that Islamization is undoubtedly a major trait of those various Armenians in Turkey, but that it is their acculturation that is most striking, and in that respect, there is a definite similarity with the Diaspora.

### **Existing between two worlds.**

Many of the Armenians staying in Turkey are in an in-between situation: in several neighborhoods of Istanbul some have Kurdish neighbors who have come from the same provinces, sometimes the same villages as themselves. The only trace of Armenian-ness they have kept is their intermarrying among converts, some of them being practicing Muslims. In a family from the Sasun county, the eldest now over 70 years old is Christian, baptized in his youth in a Syriac church, recognized as an Armenian upon his arrival in Istanbul in the 1980s, while his younger brother who joined him much later in the 1990s is a Muslim whose wife, also Armenian, wears the headscarf and prays every day at the mosque.

To categorize these Armenians, or even call them Armenians, thus poses a problem: some, even endogamous, are converts, and even practicing believers; others also endogamous, have remained Christian in that they were never converted in any other way other than bear the "Islam" tag on their identity papers while they passed on a special Armenian identity among themselves. It is made of a deep closeness to the ancestral land, of the memory of 1915, and fueled by this "keeping to ourselves" – the practice of endogamous marriages which, as we see, does not guarantee transmission – as well as a sense of difference even if the way of life in mostly Kurdish villages is very largely the same. As a Sasun-born woman in her forties explains to us, many members in her family, all Armenians, thus remain "in the middle of a bridge," between two worlds of allegiance, one Christian, the other Muslim, between two sides of an identity – one fractured, denied, hidden, the other imposed on them.

The vast majority of those Armenians of silence were dispossessed of their names when the law of the Turkish Republic of Mustafa Kemal forced all Turkish citizens to take a surname. Most of them quickly dropped their Armenian first names in the first generation, either to better hide or through the rapid acculturation of surviving orphans; they also forgot the language – except in some areas, in particular in Sasun – and only kept a smattering of religion – the memory of a prayer, signing oneself or remembering traditional holy days. A 60-year old woman of Sasun was married very young in a neighboring village. Her Armenian family had been converted, which means that, out of conformism or fear, survivors would go to the mosque while marrying among themselves in the area. During that marriage, her husband being a Armenian who had remained Christian, she could come back into the fold and "become Christian again" as she puts it.

Thus to call these Armenians "Islamized" or "converts" does not take into account the main character that defines them: the violence of 1915 was followed for these unlikely survivors by the cultural

genocide which devastated those millenary living places of Armenians, which are now lie mostly in ruins. The genocide was not just physical annihilation but the destruction of everything that formed a nation and marked its land, as well as its mindscape: religious buildings, monuments, cemeteries, villages and, of course, schools, clubs, and shops in the towns... This had less to do with linear processes of Islamization either during the Genocide, to spare one's life or just after, affecting frightened survivors, than with a massive process of acculturation prolonging and completing the genocide. Both the Patriarchate of Constantinople and modern Turkey strictly apply to Armenians a "status" which, in the end, is nothing but a version of the Ottoman *millet* – Armenians are considered a religious community. However, Armenians are before all a nation, whose act of birth was, all things considered, the fact that they were the first people to adopt Christianity as a state religion (between 301 and 307) but whose history does not start with Christianity. Indeed, adopting the Christian religion was even politically motivated, a way to state their difference from the Byzantines as well as other communities in the region, and – this is less known – it was accomplished by violently eradicating any older forms of faith and belief, generally connected to Zoroastrianism.

### Identity recovery threatened

The authoritarian drift of Turkey in the last couple of years and the murderous repression of Eastern Kurdish people suspected of belonging to the PKK seem to put a stop to the advances of the 2010s.

In Diyarbakir the re-consecration of the Surp Giragos cathedral allowed many of those Armenians to rediscover their splintered identity, not just through religions (there is no permanent priest) but by recreating an Armenian place in that enormous city, a bastion of Kurds of Turkey – a meeting place where Armenian-language courses have been organized and a few masses celebrated. In the Dersim province, mostly peopled with Alevi, another strongly persecuted minority in Turkey, Armenians have spoken up by creating an organization of Dersim Armenians in Tunceli. The same happened in Mush recently although during our 2007 survey, the families we met there excluded the possibility of such a formal gathering because of the hostility of the Kurdish population and fear of state repression.

This new outspokenness eventually translated into action: to recreate spaces marked by the Armenian presence in those cities and provinces, even if it is still a limited phenomenon, has been a powerful sign: a fear had been overcome. After Dink's assassination, the voice of the "voiceless" in the East was silenced but his legacy was taken up by the *Nor Zartonk* movement and by the continuation of *Agos*, both as a newspaper and a foundation, in an effort to break the taboos of the Turkish society. Having now three representatives in the Turkish Parliament – one of them, Garo Paylan, on the Kurdish party's list, being under serious threat – is also a major change, although partly obscured by the repressive climate maintained by the ruling power in Ankara. The current government has put an end to the hoped for reforms in Turkey and is pursuing a murderous escalation which in many ways recalls the leaden years of the 1980s military regimes and the authoritarianism practiced at the end of the Ottoman Empire or by Atatürk. Off has come the mask of

a moderate Islamist party – a contradiction in terms, as is the oxymoron "moderate extremists".

President Erdogan does not hesitate to tamper with elections when they do not favor his absolute majority, to suppress not only the Kurdish people in the east but also all those who had started to form a freer civil society, working for an incipient democracy – journalists, academics, the young mobilized at Gezi Park, etc.

In such a context, what we have seen recently as the beginning of a renaissance of Armenians, coming from families with complex histories but who nevertheless claim to belong, appears to be threatened. But that renaissance may also be threatened by the way Armenians have defined their own identity: the Armenian memory of survivors who came to France, for instance, was passed on from the 1915 trauma and often remained fixed on the massacre – not on the life of before or even less on the life of the very first generation of exiles. Until the 1940s, some women in Armenian neighborhoods of Marseilles would still wear traditional clothing and Turkish was widely spoken by survivors, the Sunday schools where Armenian was taught being a response to the fear of acculturation. In those same neighborhoods, some black and white photos of the 1920s or '30s will tell little of the way survivors lived their daily lives. The Armenian survivors who found themselves in the most diverse countries after 1915 were Anatolians with customs which must have been quite similar to those of the Eastern Armenians who turned up from the 1980s in the streets of Istanbul.

For the Turkish community, the Turkish law, and for the Patriarchate, the confines of the Armenian identity are fixed. In the Diaspora, however, which is multiple, that identity has evolved through four generations, although of course it keeps to paradigms which consciously or not underpin any people and nation. Whether you find yourself today in Armenia, in a Marseilles neighborhood or in an Istanbul church in front of those Armenians directly descended from survivors from inside Turkey, you are forced to make a double move: first, to reflect upon what are the foundations, today and yesterday, of the Armenian identity; secondly, to ask yourself which place can the already established communities open up to entire families largely acculturated and sometimes effectively Islamized. In our view, this is less a religious problem than a cultural challenge, with an added political dimension in Turkey because of the limitations of the legal status imposed on Armenians acknowledged as such.



