

# KURDISH MP CHALLENGES TURKISH PARLIAMENT ON GENOCIDE

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By Ayse Gunaysu, [The Armenian Weekly](#), 8 November 2009

"During the last period of the Ottoman Empire, in 1915-16, the Union and Progress Party systematically pursued a policy of extermination of the Christians who had been the native peoples of the country for centuries." 

These were the words articulated at the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) by Selahattin Demirtas, the deputy chairman of the parliamentary group of Democratic Society Party (DTP)--the voice of Kurds in the Turkish Parliament. Demirtas had taken the floor at the parliamentary session on Oct. 21 to speak about the protocols signed between Armenia and Turkey.

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"No national security considerations can be an excuse for the annihilation of a population by means of forced displacement and massacres," he said. "Governments, in an effort to clear themselves of the guilt, resorted to denial and to distortion of historical facts to conceal the truth. They rewrote the history. In school books, Armenians are portrayed as hostile figures, exaggerating the incidents of violence by Armenian activists and never telling the truth about the massacred Armenians."

The meeting minutes, available on the website of the TGNA, reveals the interruptions by other deputies, member of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), the opposition party Republican People's Party (CHP), and an independent deputy, who called out loud: "What are you talking about? Say what you want to say openly!" or "Shame on you!" or "Don't slander" or "What about the Turkish diplomats assassinated?"

 *Selahattin Demirtas*

"The word 'Armenian' has been used as an insult in this country," continued Demirtas. "Even the president of the Republic of Turkey was accused of having secret Armenian ancestors, as if this was a sin. They did this to humiliate him. And what a shame that the president himself answered this 'accusation' in such a way as to confirm the humiliating connotation of the word, by trying to prove that this was not true."

Demirtas suggested the formation of a history committee, consisting of independent historians from both sides, that would aim at revealing historic truths. "Without doing this, no real policy of peace can be pursued in foreign or domestic policy and no real resolution can be reached by ignoring the tragedy, by acting as if the loss of lives was a result of unwanted adverse circumstances. I know that what I say upsets those who remain loyal to the status quo. However for us to avoid recognizing historical truths just for the sake of the status quo would mean betraying our conscience and taking a politically unethical stance. So Turkey should lead the way to uncover the historical facts instead of continuing to carry the burden of a tragedy caused by the Committee of Union and Progress. In order for truly friendly relations between the two countries, it should be acknowledged that this is the only way for mutual trust."

This was a first for the Turkish Parliament. There may be parts in Demirtas' speech where one would disagree. But for me, these points of disagreement are less important than the declaration-- in the Turkish Grand National Assembly--of the systematic extermination of Armenians in 1915. And it was a Kurdish MP who made this happen. The Kurds, some of whom actively took part in the Armenian Genocide, were also the first in Turkey to talk and write about the genocide of the Armenians and Assyrians.

Demirtas's words weren't in the headlines the next day as one would expect; those days were unusually exciting, as a group of PKK guerillas had just crossed the border and given themselves up to Turkish security forces as a gesture to support the government's peace initiative. TV channels and newspapers were full of scenes of rejoicing and celebrations by thousands of Kurds, old and young, women and men, all welcoming the peace group. The guerillas waved their hands to the crowds, who were joyously demonstrating for peace. A few days passed with puzzlement on the part of the Turkish public and the opinion makers. However, the puzzlement did not last long. A wave of anger surged with columnists condemning such "scenes of outright defiance," "celebrations of PKK's victory," or "shameless display of support to PKK." Then came the demonstrations of the "mothers of martyrs" and others condemning the PKK. The panel discussions on TV featured even democrat and liberal figures criticizing the DTP for rallying Kurds to celebrate the PKK guerillas' return and provoking Turkish nationalism.

Just when Demirtas was giving his speech about the Armenia-Turkey protocols, I was called by Agos newspaper to comment on the coming of the PKK group as a peace delegation. I sent them a message saying, in short, that I did not trust Turkey. I explained that given the age-old authoritarian nationalistic policies pursued by governments, instigating hostility and hatred in the minds of people, no real peace policy would be possible. The majority of the Turkish people themselves would not let this dream come true. Although this was what I thought, I still had the hope that this time I might be wrong, that some good things could happen in this country. The pictures in the newspapers, the images on TV of old men and women welcoming the PKK members at the Habur border gate-- dancing, waving hands, laughing, and cheerin--were so impressive that one could not help but

hope.

But Turkey did not put me down and once more not my dreams but my fears came true. The government suspended the peace program and said that the coming of PKK members from European countries was cancelled due to the Kurds' provocative welcoming demonstrations. Shortly after this news, Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK, announced that they too had suspended the process.

Now all advocates of peace are waiting for a new sign indicating the resumption of the peace process. Turkey's lack of any tradition of reconciliation and its deeply rooted authoritarian habits of resorting to violence instead of understanding did its job again.

### **A Kurdish intellectual's comprehensive work about the genocide**

Speaking about the Kurdish intellectuals and activists who first talked and wrote about the Armenian Genocide in Turkey, I have to mention the book of Recep Marasli, who was one of the victims of the horrible tortures at Diyarbakir Prison in the 1980's and who served 15 years in various prisons. In the preface to his book *Ermeni Ulusal Demokratik Hareketive 1915 Soykirimini* (The Armenian National Democratic Movement and 1915 Genocide) (Peri Publishing House, 2008, Istanbul), Marasli writes how he first wrote about the Armenian Genocide in 1982, when he was in the Alemdag Prison. It was the first and worst years of the military rule. At the same time, it was a time when Turkish diplomats were assassinated one by one by the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia, and anti-Armenian sentiments were at their peak in Turkey, provoked by the insulting headlines in Turkish newspapers. In the Diyarbakir Prison, those inmates suspected of being of Armenian origin were subjected to special violence, and there were incidents of forced circumcision. During these days, Recep Marasli with a number of his fellow prisoners secretly prepared and circulated a pamphlet about the Armenian Genocide in the Alemdag Prison. This pamphlet would later serve as the outline of his present book. He thinks it may well be the first structured writing about the Armenian Genocide in Kurdish circles in modern Turkish history. Some of the Kurdish inmates found it irrelevant to the circumstances of the day (as the central issue for them was the Kurdish Question); some even thought that Marasli was of Armenian origin. This pamphlet was a turning point in Marasli's efforts on the topic. Marasli and his comrades circulated the leaflets in prison every April 24th to commemorate the genocide, and Marasli started to read everything he could find about the genocide. Afterwards, he integrated the contents of the first pamphlet in his defense statement, which was submitted during his trial in Diyarbakir Military Court for his membership in the Kurdish political organization Rizgari. He developed this piece of writing later on during his imprisonment, served in the prisons of Eskisehir and Aydin, and finally produced this comprehensive 544-page book about the Armenian Genocide, its historical background, its mechanism, and its aftermath--the Turkification policies in the republican period up to the present day. At the end of the book, there is a very interesting list of the old and new names of Kurdish, Armenian, and Assyrian settlements which I think is a precious resource in this respect.

To go back to our starting point, Selahattin Demirtas' address in the TGNA was something one can never expect from a Turkish member of parliament, at least under present conditions. I think much has to be done to explore the factors that bring the grandchildren of the peoples of the old Armenia and Kurdistan closer to each other now. Such exploration and efforts to build on the findings would help a lot in paving the way for a more democratic Turkey that would bring justice to all.

