

SACRIFICING COMMON SENSE ON THE ALTAR OF IDENTITY

Posted on June 20, 2012 by Keghart

The Journal of
TURKISH WEEKLY

Category: [Opinions](#)



Turkish Armenians at a Glance



Husrev Tabak, [The Journal of Turkish Weekly](#), 20 June 2012

The tension between Azerbaijan and Armenia rose once again early this month due to the deadly armed clashes along the border. The confrontation has intensified and the number of fatalities reached nine. Consequently, the possibility of further escalation of the crisis causes anxiety within the international community and among neighboring countries. However, our attention is confined to the way the conflict is perceived and reported on by transnational Armenian diaspora communities aside from the international dimension of the dispute. We particularly place emphasis on the reflections of conflict among the Turkish Armenians and in their discourse regarding identity.

Turkish Armenians at a Glance



Husrev Tabak, [The Journal of Turkish Weekly](#), 20 June 2012

The tension between Azerbaijan and Armenia rose once again early this month due to the deadly armed clashes along the border. The confrontation has intensified and the number of fatalities reached nine. Consequently, the possibility of further escalation of the crisis causes anxiety within the international community and among neighboring countries. However, our attention is confined to the way the conflict is perceived and reported on by transnational Armenian diaspora communities aside from the international dimension of the dispute. We particularly place emphasis on the reflections of conflict among the Turkish Armenians and in their discourse regarding identity.

Where do the Turkish Armenians locate themselves within the Armenian-Azerbaijani military dispute? Would it be biased to think that Turkish Armenians naturally and exogenously align themselves with Armenia at all costs and in any given circumstances? Diaspora studies would suggest that their Armenianness may compel or oblige them to take sides in favor of the political means and ends of the homeland (referring to Armenia here). This might be true for particularly the nationalist parties within the broader diasporic community. However, it is expected that ideology, principles, or simply good sense would exert influence on the conclusion a member of the diaspora has drawn on the issues related to the homeland. Nonetheless, our expectation is not met when we start probing why liberal, socialist, or social democratic Armenians in Turkey acquire a single-sided and partial (therefore nationalistic) discourse in the latent Azerbaijan-Armenia dispute. The recent military clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan have presented a question as to the position taken by the Turkish Armenians (especially of those identified as socialist and democratic).

Among the broader Armenian diaspora, the nationalist or conservative responses to the incidents put blame on Azerbaijan for committing an outrageous act through border transgressions and consequently murdering Armenian soldiers. The Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA) for instance, reports the one incident as Azerbaijani aggression, an Azerbaijani attack against Armenia, outrage by Azerbaijan's military, or a brazen attack (Armenian weekly, June 6, 2012). Their point of departure is nationalism-driven and consistent in its own rights. Principally, Agos would embrace a relatively impartial and unbiased discourse that differs from the ANCA for instance. We will see below whether it does.

Differing from mainstream media, the Turkish Armenians' leading weekly paper Agos comes forth here as an influential social-democratic and to a certain extent socialist voice of a minority community. Its standpoint reflects ideological and political consistency most of the time. Historically, the paper strives to democratically mobilize Turkish citizens (regardless of their ethnic origin) to face the historical incidents of 1915. The weekly paper also favors and promotes an anti-racist, pluralist, multicultural, and democratic society that would endow the country with societal accord and tolerance through which peaceful co-existence within the country would be fulfilled. Such a political leaning indeed clearly serves to the strengthening of social harmony. Nonetheless, when the issues come to Armenia and its relations with the neighboring states, unexpectedly, the paper ends up with the same conclusions as the rest of the Armenian diaspora over the world. Such a controversy deserves highlighting and thorough discussion. The recent Azerbaijan-Armenia armed clashes evidently confirm this attitude of Agos.

Initially, we should note that the Turkish Armenian diaspora, particularly those who embrace democratic discourse, could pave the way to Azerbaijan-Armenia and Turkey-Armenia rapprochements. In line with this, it was expected that the socialist and democratic Armenians in Turkey would keep their feet on the ground and write impartial news in order not to let the temporal and fallacious disputes distract from the peace efforts and possibilities. In contrast to the requirements of its ideological, political, and social position, Agos releases news that is discursively backing and legitimizing the Armenian nationalist claims about the armed conflict while denouncing Azerbaijan. Agos, in this sense (from its website), published news regarding the dispute on June 4, 5, 6, and 8, all of which converges on an argument that Azerbaijan is the side that started the war and Armenian forces managed to repulse the attacking side after unfortunately taking some casualties. The narration and depiction of the incident and the articulated political language demonstrate that Agos, a prominent voice of Turkish Armenians, holds an ideological leaning similar to the world-wide Armenian diaspora on the issues related to the homeland. This supportive leaning spans from the territorial claims of Armenia on Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia's shameful denial of the Khojali massacre.

Editor-in-chief of Agos after Hrant Dink Rober Koptas' editorial on the "Justice for Khojali Meeting" in Istanbul (February 23, 2012) reflects a similar stance. He poses the question of whether "those who

attended to the meeting today really commemorate the innocent people? Or do they try to prevent the remembrance of other innocent dead people?" Simply by reversing his argument we can claim that through the use of the shameful 1915 incidents, he endeavors to silence the articulation of Khojali massacre. In fact whichever way we look at it, there is no room for a democratic or impartial bearing in Agos's attitude toward the disputed issues surrounding Armenia, which in turn prevents Agos from consistently grasping a democratic voice. Apparently, when Armenia is in question the identity discourse prevails among others in Agos weekly.

This is what we can call sacrificing good sense on the altar of identity. Turkish Armenians' declaration of their ethnic identity as Armenian in Turkey is yet to be adequate. In order to enhance and highlight their identity, they feel it necessary to support and be on the side of Armenia in making "national claims." Agos does so, albeit its ideological stance against nationalism and nationalist discourse in normal occasions.

Theoretically speaking, for Agos the salience of its identity depends on the performative constitution of its difference (Campbell, 1993:8). That means Agos, via standing on the side of Armenia, places emphasis on its difference from Turkey's national attitudes toward the Azerbaijan-Armenia dispute. This in fact sharpens the Armenian identity in Turkey. Additionally, the way Agos draws the boundaries of being an Armenian (regardless of the ideological difference backing Armenia's national claims) presupposes that group membership requires sharing assumptions regarding Armenia. Finally, since in the course of time identity becomes a norm that governs the future conduct of relations (ibid: 10), as long as they do not change the common understanding of being an Armenian, it would be cogent to predict that Agos will keep favoring Armenia in the future at all costs.

Consequently, unless Agos gives up favoring Armenian nationalism vis-à-vis its ideological leaning, the Turkish Armenians will keep sacrificing good sense on the altar of a vague identity.

Works Cited:

Campbell, David (1993) *Writing Security - United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

** Husrev Tabak is a doctoral researcher at the University of Manchester and the deputy director of CESRAN (Centre for Strategic Research and Analysis).*

