THE KURDS IN THE TURKISH–ARMENIAN RECONCILIATION PROCESS

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By **Bilgin Ayata,** Massis Post, 2 December 2018

In this article, Bilgin Ayata argues that issues such as the Armenian genocide and the violence against Kurds and Alevis should be examined jointly instead of separately. Unlike many observers who consider the Armenian genocide as a problem of the past, and the Kurdish conflict as a problem of the present time—thus operating a compartmentalization and disjunction of State crimes—she deems "incomprehensible that the Kurdish and Armenian issues should be dealt with in isolation from each other." Therefore, she proposes an alternative view of State violence against Armenians, Kurds, Alevis and other persecuted groups in Turkey. Finally, she explains why the language and content of civil society actions carried out by Kurdish activists in relation with the Armenian genocide are so radically different from those of their much more publicized Turkish counterparts.

A century after the Armenian Genocide and its ongoing denial by the Turkish state, there has emerged a notable and unprecedented interest in the Armenian past and present both in civil society discourse and scholarship in Turkey, accompanied by various reconciliation initiatives at the state and society levels. Observers have suggested that this increased engagement with Turkey's suppressed past is an outcome of its EU candidacy, the democratization reforms of the early 2000s, and the shockwave among liberal segments of Turkish society caused by the 2007 assassination of Armenian journalist Hrant Dink. I argue that this shortsighted analysis, which completely ignores the Kurdish movement's transformative challenge to Turkish denialism since the 1980s, echoes the key fallacy of present discussions of Turkey's engagement with its past: compartmentalization and disjunction of interlinked state crimes. One of the most curious features of the reconciliation debates in contemporary Turkey is the coexistence of various reconciliation processes that occur in complete isolation from each other.

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Similar to the Armenian Genocide, other topics suppressed by official state narratives, such as violence against Kurds and Alevis, have been increasingly challenged and debated, yet no links have been drawn between them. This is particularly surprising given that some state practices associated with the genocide, such as displacement and dispossession, not only continued during the republican period but constitute key elements of nation making—along with forced assimilation—in Turkey. After the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, these practices were applied to Kurds and Alevis, while pogroms against and deportations of the remaining Armenian and Greek population continued periodically into the late 1950s. Until 1991, the very existence of a Kurdish identity was officially denied and the use of the Kurdish language was banned. Given that the Kurds constituted roughly 20 percent of Turkey's population, the entire state apparatus, from the military to the education system, had to be put into service to suppress Kurdish culture and identity.

With the formation of the Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (Kurdistan Workers' Party; PKK) in 1978 and its armed struggle against this suppression, the Kurdish conflict—as it is referred to today—has since dominated the political agenda of Turkey, shaking up profoundly the country's politics of denial. The Kurdish struggle forced the state to revise its policy when in 1991 President Suleyman Demirel officially admitted that the Kurds exist—a milestone in the history of modern Turkey. Although the suppression of the Kurds only intensified after this admission, with state security forces displacing 1 to 3 million Kurds from their homes and carrying out other grave human rights violations, the genie was already out of the bottle: state ideology based on the myth of a homogeneous Turkish nation-state had been irreversibly cracked, enabling further questioning of national myths and practices. While the Kurdish movement's successful challenge to official denial is certainly not the single explanation for the increased interest in questioning official history, it is rather puzzling that the Kurdish and Armenian issues are treated in disjunction from each other in the current pluralist re-negotiations of national identity and history by liberal segments of civil society. I argue that this is

due to a tendency of scholars and civil society to treat the Armenian Genocide as a problem of the past, and the Kurdish conflict as a problem of the present. Such a compartmentalization obscures the complex but important question of ruptures and continuities in Turkish state discourse and practice. While the chronology, extent, and practices of state violence against Armenians, Kurds, Alevis, and other persecuted groups vary, these groups share subjection to the politics of denial in the Turkish Republic. Whereas the official denial of the Armenian Genocide and of Kurdish identity is known at the international level, the denial of mass violence against the Alevis, such as the Dersim Genocide in 1938, has only recently received domestic attention in Turkey. The politics of denial against non-Turkish, non-Sunni populations has resulted in claims for recognition, justice, and institutional equality among all of the suppressed groups, but the question of how to confront and reconcile them occurs in parallel, disconnected discussions. I propose that the compartmentalization of these various issues constitutes the central weakness of current reconciliation discourses. I also suggest that this compartmentalization is neither accidental nor arbitrary, but instead is a continuity of a nationalist ideology whose proponents have successfully presented Turkish nationalism and its violence as a response to rather than a cause of the Armenian and Kurdish "problems."

This depiction of minorities as distinct problems has become so normalized over time that even present-day critical approaches among Turkish intellectuals or post-nationalist scholars reflect it.

1 One reason why this may be the case is that such compartmentalized treatments of these "problems" effectively contributes to existing power asymmetries resulting from genocide, displacement, dispossession, and denial in Turkey. It consolidates Turkish intellectuals and interlocutors as the main actors in the reconciliation process while reducing intellectuals from the disenfranchised groups to their particular and precarious subject positions. The omission of the Kurds in the Turkish-Armenian reconciliation process vividly illustrates this point. Although Kurdish intellectuals, activists, and organizations addressed the Armenian Genocide in various ways long before the shift in Turkish public debate occurred, their contributions are hardly recognized or included in civil society debates or scholarly analysis in Turkey and beyond.

2 The neglect of this contribution signifies not only incomplete analysis, but more importantly a missed opportunity to reflect on alternative approaches to reconciliation. In contrast to popular civil society initiatives in Turkey that are usually invoked in the context of domestic changes in regard to the genocide (such as the conference on Ottoman Armenians at Bilgi University in 2005, the Apology Campaign of 2008, and the 24 April Taksim commemorations since 2010), Kurdish players proactively address claims of Armenian players that are notably absent in the Turkish-Armenian reconciliation process, such as land reparations, official acknowledgment of the genocide, and other aspects of a justice-based reconciliation. Turkish intellectuals who prominently advance Turkish-Armenian reconciliation have sidelined the question of restitution and justice as obstacles to the process, criticizing organizations in the Armenian diaspora for demanding them.

3 Positioning themselves as mediators or interlocutors between the Turkish state and society, Turkish public intellectuals have taken on a tricky role in the reconciliation processes, trying to assist the state and society out of the dead end to which crude denialism has led. Instead of proactively supporting the demands of the Kurds and Armenians, public intellectuals in Turkey have been dragging behind the official discourse, with their concerns that the nation suffer the least collateral damage possible prevailing over the quest for justice, acknowledgment, and truth.

By contrast, efforts by Kurdish intellectuals and organizations to confront the Armenian Genocide are not concerned with what the Turkish society is ready or not ready for. Their reconciliation initiatives are strongly shaped by the violence and injustice to which they were subjected by the state. In the course of the transition from empire to republic the position of the Kurds vis-a-vis state power changed. Once loyal subjects of the late Ottoman Empire who actively participated in the killings and dispossession of the Armenians, the Kurds became the new internal enemies of the republic, turning them from perpetrators into victims. In the course of their struggle against denial and suppression, the Kurdish movement in Turkey has advanced a transformation of Kurdish society with an emancipatory vision of politics based on a heightened sense of justice, pluralism, and radical democracy. How Kurdish players position themselves in regard to the complicity of Kurds in the genocide constitutes a litmus test for the credibility and viability of this political vision. This is why the language and content of civil society actions by Kurdish players with regard to the Armenian Genocide are so decidedly different from those of actions by their much more prominent Turkish counterparts. The May 2008 land return by Kurdish intellectual Berzan Boti is an important example that illustrates the different content and language of Kurdish reconciliation efforts. Boti is a Kurdish writer from Siirt who spent eleven years in the infamous Diyarbakir prison as a political prisoner before being released in 1991. While engaging with the history of his village and the Armenian Genocide, he discovered that the land owned by his family had once belonged to Assyrians. His forefathers had confiscated the land during the 1915 genocide. In 2007 Boti publicly announced in his column in an online Kurdish magazine that he would return the land to its rightful owners. After discovering they had all been killed in the genocide, he decided to transfer the property deeds to the Seyfo Center in the Netherlands, an Assyrian organization that campaigns worldwide for the recognition of the Assyrian Genocide. Boti communicated with the organization, and the transfer was completed in October 2008.

In May 2009 the official handover took place in the Swedish parliament with both Boti and representatives of various Assyrian organizations in attendance.5 For the first time, issues of land return and restitution in Turkey in regard to the Armenian Genocide had been addressed as part of an apology, and in a way that went beyond words. Boti's act set a historical example for what an apology and justice-based reconciliation could entail vis-a-vis the Armenian Genocide. However, although unprecedented, it was ignored by the Turkish media and public. In contrast, an apology campaign initiated by Turkish intellectuals several months later did receive nationwide and international attention, though it was sharply criticized for its limited scope, its wording, and its failure

to address the victims.6 In fact, the text of the apology campaign did not even contain the word "genocide," instead using the term büyük felaket (Great Catastrophe) and thus avoiding recognition of the crime. This led a group of Kurdish intellectuals to issue a critical declaration entitled, "It's Not a Catastrophe, but Genocide: This is the entire matter at heart."7 Connecting the denial of the Armenian Genocide to the denial of Kurdish identity in Turkey, the declaration accused the apology campaign of dancing around the word "genocide," just as Turkish intellectuals had long adopted uncritically the terminology of the state when talking about Kurds rather than use the term "Kurd." Whereas since the late 1990s no progressive Turkish intellectual or scholar from Turkey has refrained from using the term "Kurd" in their writing, until recently, and in many cases until the present, most of these intellectuals and scholars have avoided or rejected using the term "Armenian Genocide."8 Yet, as the declaration by Kurdish intellectuals shows, such inconsistency and political maneuvering is rendered difficult when those confronting the denial of the Armenian Genocide take the denial of the Kurds into account and do not compartmentalize the two issues chronologically. What is at stake here is not just terminology, but the positioning of intellectuals and civil society with regard to claims of justice and restitution. Another, often overlooked, initiative that offers an alternative approach to state-led practices of reconciliation is the 2009 restoration of the Surp Giragos Church in Diyarbakir. This project, carried out jointly by the Kurdish municipality and the Armenian patriarchate, stands in stark contrast to the Turkish government's restoration of the Akdamar Church in 2007, as the following comparison will show. Built in 1515–18, the Surp Giragos church was the largest Armenian church in the Middle East until 1915. During the genocide, the entire Christian population of Diyarbakir was killed, deported, or forcibly converted to Islam, and their places of worship were destroyed. In the republican period, particularly from the 1960s onward, Diyarbakir became the center for Kurdish activism and has often been referred to as the secret capital of Kurdistan, thus erasing the fact that almost half of its population had once been Armenian. In 2004, however, the election of two longtime Kurdish activists, Osman Baydemir and Abdullah Demirbas, as the mayors of Diyarbakir and the municipality of Sur, respectively, initiated a series of steps at the local level to revive the Armenian past and presence in Diyarbakir. In addition to providing Armenian translations to all existing streets and welcome signs, they took up the project of restoring the Surp Giragos Church. Moreover, they returned the deeds of the church as well as the deeds of any other properties that they discovered during the restoration process to have once belonged to Armenians, to the Armenian Patriarchate. In 2011, the church was reopened by Mayor Baydemir and Armenian Archbishop Atesyan.

By contrast, the restoration process of the Akdamar Church on Lake Van by the government sparked great controversy and opposition by Armenian organizations and Armenian intellectuals, including the late Hrant Dink. Already in his first announcement that the government intended to restore an Armenian church, Prime Minister Erdogan introduced it as an effort to counter "international genocide claims," making it into a tool for maintaining genocide denial.9 In 2006, the minister of culture, under whose auspices the restoration was carried out, announced that the

church would be reopened on 24 April 2007—the international commemoration day of the Armenian Genocide. In response to the opposition of Armenian organizations abroad, the Ministry of Culture proposed 11 April as the new date, but in the old Armenian calendar this corresponded to 24 April. The government's insistence on making the church renovation a showcase to counter genocide recognition led the Armenian journalist Hrant Dink to describe the restoration process as a "comedy." In January 2007, Dink was assassinated by Turkish nationalists after being targeted in the Turkish media for reasons unrelated to the church project, but the opening of the church was nevertheless postponed to September 2007. When it finally reopened, it reopened not as a church but as a museum, in which mass could be held only once per year. The original Armenian name of the church, Surp Khach ("Holy Cross" in Armenian), was changed to Akdamar ("white vein" in Turkish), hence continuing the state practice of Turkifying Armenian names. Neither the title deeds nor any other property was returned to the Patriarchate. Boti's individual act of apology through land return and the actions of the Diyarbakir municipality provide only a glimpse of Kurdish players' alternative reconciliation efforts. It goes without saying that they do not represent the stance of all Kurdish intellectuals and activists or Kurdish civil society. Kurdish denialism over the role of the Kurds in the genocide and what this role entails for the present also exists, especially when issues of land and reparations are involved. Yet they help to convey what is missing in the discussion of the Turkish-Armenian reconciliation process. The proximity of Turkish intellectual discourse to the official narrative becomes visible when compared to the reconciliation efforts of Kurdish players, who do not exclude issues of justice, restitution, and official genocide recognition. Given the recent history of the Kurds, it is not surprising that the language and content of their efforts at reconciliation are guided by justice-based reconciliation. Their transition from killers to victims—to reverse Mahmood Mamdani's expression—has not only enabled paths for self-inquiry but also tied the credibility of the Kurdish quest for justice to their ability to provide it to Armenians and other victims of the genocide. What is surprising, however, is that both the Turkish and Armenian players within the Turkish–Armenian reconciliation process, as well as the observers of this process, are oblivious to the alternative perspectives offered by Kurdish reconciliation efforts. I have argued in this piece that such unawareness is due to the lack of a comprehensive approach in current reconciliation discourses in Turkey. Marked by compartmentalization and disjunction of interlinked state crimes in both public intellectual debates and in scholarship, the reconciliation effort remains trapped in a double bind of confrontation and denial. It also remains trapped in a double blindness toward the limitations that the present poses to both the past and the future.

Bilgin Ayata is a faculty member at University of Basel, Switzerland Social Sciences Department