TURKISH PERCEPTION OF THE RECENT US COURT RULING

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By Ayse Gunaysu, The Armenian Weekly, 27 August 2009

Among thousands of news items showering down from international agencies, none of the Turkish dailies or TV channels skipped the news about a U.S. Federal Court of Appeals ruling against Armenian demands for unpaid insurance claims. Many headlines revealed a hardly concealed note of victory, reporting that the U.S. Court had dealt a "big blow" to Armenians. Some of them were a little bit more professional, reflecting only a satisfaction: "Court decision to anger Armenians." Even the most seemingly "objective" ones used wording that presented the issue as a defeat on the part of the "Armenians" —not a violation of the rights of legitimate beneficiaries, the clients of insurance companies that profited from a government's extermination of its own citizens. Even the daily Taraf, considered to be waging the most courageous struggle against the "deep state," used the headline: "Bad news to Armenians from a US court" (Aug. 22, 2009, p.3), a headline that, intentionally or not, reinforces the essentialist conception of Armenians widespread in Turkey and reflects a cold-hearted pseudo-impartiality —"bad news"!—in the face of an infuriating usurpation of one's rights.

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Apart from a handful of people, no one in Turkey, watching the news or reading the headlines (often without reading the full texts), knows that at the turn of the century several thousands of Armenians in the provinces of the old Armenia were issued life-insurance policies, with benefits amounting to more than $20 million in 1915—dollars still unpaid to the legal heirs of the victims who perished under a reign of terror. This is not surprising because this audience is even ignorant of the fact that on the eve of World War I, there were 2,925 Armenian settlements in the old Armenia, with 1,996 schools teaching over 173,000 male and female students, and 2,538 churches and monasteries—all proof of a vibrant Armenian presence in the Ottoman Empire. When I tried to explain this to my 83-year-old mother, who thought the U.S. court had done something good for Turkey, she couldn't believe her ears. She was quite sincere when she asked: "Western insurance companies? At that time? In Harput, in Merzifon, in Kayseri? Are you sure?" Because she could not even imagine that

what is now to us the remote, less-developed cities with rural environs where pre-capitalist patterns still prevail—places more or less isolated from today's metropolitan centers—were once, before 1915, rich and developed urban centers, with inhabitants much closer to the Western world than their fellow Muslim citizens, in their economic activities, social structure, and way of life. Although a university graduate (something unusual for a woman in Turkey at that time), a person of culture with a real sense of justice in everything she does, my mother was brought up in a system of education based on a history that was rewritten to reconstruct a national identity of pride, and which turned facts upside down. This was the result: an "enlightened" individual who knew nothing about how things were in her own—beloved—country and what had happened just a decade before her birth. So, how can one expect my mother to know that Talat Pasha, a member of the PUC triumvira and one of the top organizers of the Armenian Genocide, had shocked Henry Morgenthau, the U.S. Ambassador to Istanbul in 1915, with his audacity when he said: "I wish, that you would get the American life insurance companies to send us a complete list of their Armenian policy holders. They are practically all dead now and have left no heirs to collect the money. It of course all escheats to the state. The government is the beneficiary now. Will you do so?"

The Turkish audience, apart from that handful of people, that received the message about the U.S. Court of Appeals ruling against the Armenians' right to seek justice, didn't stop to think that this was something about one's most basic rights.

But the reason is simple: National ideology blocks people's minds. There is a special meaning attributed to the word "compensation" in Turkey. It is believed that recognition will be followed by demands of compensation, which will naturally lead to demands of territory. So, the reference to "compensation" (to be paid to "Armenians") in these reports is directly connected in their minds to Armenians' claim to territory.

This is all about denial. Denial is not an isolated phenomenon, not a policy independent of all other aspects. Denial is a system. An integrated whole. You don't only deny what really happened; in order to deny what really happened, you have to deny even the existence of the people to whom it happened. In order to deny their existence, you have to wipe out the evidence of their existence from both the physical and intellectual environment. Physical refers to the 2,925 Armenian settlements with 1,996 schools and 2,538 churches and monasteries that are non-existent now. Intellectual corresponds to my mother's perception of the U.S. Court of Appeal's ruling as something good for Turkey.

I watched a film on TV tonight, Akira Kurosawa's "Rhapsody in August," a film about an old lady, a hibakusha (the Japanese word for the victims of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II) and her four grandchildren. Watching the film, I saw people commemorating their dead ones with great respect, taking care of their monuments with endless love, raising their children in the same spirit, observing Buddhist rituals, praying for their losses. The details showing all these were elegantly and very impressively depicted. Watching a blind hibakusha gently cleaning

the marble platform of the monument with great care, I thought of Armenians of my country, who are deprived of this very basic right to publicly honor the memory of their lost ones. This ban is woven into the very structure of Turkish society, because the founders of the new Turkish Republic and their successors built a nation and successfully put into practice an "engineering of the spirit" whereby the people are convinced, made to sincerely believe, that such commemorations are a direct insult to themselves.

The outcome of such engineering, this whole complicated system of denial, is very difficult to dismantle. The Turkish ruling elite will not recognize the genocide, not in the short-term, not in the mid-term. In the long-term, maybe. But how "long" a term this will be is something unknown. The dynamic that would step up the process is the recognition from below, i.e. recognition by the people—a very slow process, but much more promising than an official recognition in the foreseeable future. People in Turkey are one by one going through a very special kind of enlightenment—meeting with facts, learning more about the near history, getting into closer contact with Armenians here and elsewhere (for example, meeting and listening to Prof. Marc Nichanian speaking in the language of philosophy and literature, hearing his words about how meaningless an apology is when what happened to Armenians was "unforgivable," about the meaning of the "usurpation of mourning" and the "impossibility of representation" of what Armenians experienced. More and more stories are appearing in the dailies and periodicals in Turkey of our grandmothers and grandfathers of Armenian origin who were stripped of their Armenian identities, at least in the public sphere. More and more books are being published about the genocide, enabling the readers to try and imagine what is unimaginable.

This will turn the wheels of a long process of recognition from below, a recognition in the hearts of people that will inevitably interact with the process of official recognition—a must for true justice—no matter how distant it may be for the time being.