CRIMINALIZING GRIEF: ARMENIAN TESTIMONY ON TRIAL IN TURKEY

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By Vartan Tashjian, Beirut, Lebanon, 12 December 2025

In Turkey, allowing minority voices to be heard, particularly on the subject of the Armenian Genocide, still carries serious consequences. This reality became evident with the prosecution of Tuğçe Yılmaz, an editor of the Turkish online magazine *Bianet*, who was charged for reporting on how young Armenians in Istanbul experience their identity and collective memory.

Such incidents are not new. A year earlier, Turkey's broadcasting watchdog, RTÜK, permanently revoked the license of *Açık Radyo*, a 30-year-old independent radio station. The outlet had already been taken off the air after a guest referred to the "Armenian Genocide" during an interview.

Yılmaz's article, titled "Armenian Youths Speak Up: A 109-Year-Long Mourning," was published on April 24, 2024, the Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day. Its purpose was to shed light on the contemporary experience of growing up Armenian in Turkey by amplifying the voices of young people whose stories are rarely heard. Shortly thereafter, authorities initiated legal proceedings against Yılmaz under **Article 301** of Turkey's Criminal Code, accusing her of insulting Turkish national identity and the state.



The charges brought against Yılmaz are not an isolated act of pressure against a single journalist. Rather, they form part of a broader pattern aimed at curtailing media freedom and marginalizing minority communities, while reinforcing state-imposed silence around discussions of the Armenian Genocide.

The Voices That Triggered the Prosecution

Yılmaz's reporting focused on the testimonies of two 27-year-old Armenians from Istanbul, Aren and Zepür, whose accounts reveal the psychological and social pressures of living with a denied history.

Aren described how, from an early age, he learned to conceal his Armenian identity as a matter of self-preservation. His mother advised him to refer to her as "*anne*" rather than "*mama*" in public

spaces, believing the Turkish word would attract less attention. He also recalled the heightened anxiety surrounding April 24, a time when his grandmother avoided speaking Turkish altogether, associating the language with historical trauma.

During his military service, these tensions intensified. Aren spoke of the fear instilled by the memory of Sevag Balıkçı, an Armenian conscript who died in 2011. He recounted an encounter with a commanding officer on April 24, during which he was questioned about martyrdom. Standing before hundreds of soldiers, he stated, "I cannot be a martyr, sir. I am Armenian." The officer's response, **"We didn't kill anyone; if we had, you wouldn't be here"**, left a lasting impression.

Zepür, in turn, traced her family's inherited trauma to the 1915 resistance on Musa Dagh and to the deportations and killings of Armenians and Alevis in Dersim in 1938. Both interviewees described April 24 as a day marked by **"anxiety and worry", "a mourning without end"** that has endured for more than a century. While they emphasized their continued presence through language, culture, and identity, they also underlined a persistent prohibition: the inability to grieve collectively or openly demand justice.

Criminalizing a Core Journalistic Responsibility

By providing a platform for these testimonies, Yılmaz fulfilled a fundamental journalistic duty. The state's response, however, was to treat this act of reporting as a criminal offense.

The investigation did not originate from a formal judicial initiative but from an anonymous complaint submitted to the Presidential Communication Center (CİMER). The complaint alleged that the article incited "public hatred and hostility" and amounted to "terror propaganda" due to its use of the term "genocide."

Yılmaz was detained on June 3, 2024, during a routine identity check, after facial-recognition software flagged her as a suspect. She was held overnight without being informed of the reason for her detention and was initially taken to the wrong courthouse. Only while being transferred to the correct venue was she informed of the charges against her.



In her testimony, Yılmaz firmly defended her work, stressing that the article consisted solely of the words of her interviewees and was produced within the scope of constitutionally protected journalistic activity. She rejected any intent to insult the Turkish nation or state and warned that a

conviction would send a chilling message to the media at large. The case, she argued, lacks a solid legal basis and relies on a vague and controversial provision of the criminal code.

Echoes of an Unsettled Past

The prosecution underscores a persistent reality in Turkey: discussion of the Armenian Genocide remains a red line, even amid periods of purported diplomatic rapprochement with Armenia. Prolonged legal proceedings, often functioning as punishment in themselves, are routinely used to exhaust journalists financially and psychologically.

This case directly reflects the fears articulated by Aren and Zepür. When a journalist is prosecuted for using the term "Armenian Genocide," it reinforces the message that the lived reality of survivors' descendants remains criminalized.

Yılmaz has drawn parallels between her case and that of the late **Hrant Dink**, who was also prosecuted under Article 301 before being assassinated. Her legal counsel has pointed out that "this country has already paid a heavy price because of Article 301," referencing landmark rulings such as *Dink v. Turkey*. For many Armenians, this trial serves as yet another reminder that the cycle of silencing and persecution has not been broken.

The first court hearing of Yilmaz case took place on December 3, 2025, in the presence of numerous press freedom advocates. The next session has been scheduled for **April 21, 2026**. This extended delay functions as a punitive mechanism in itself. Ultimately, the case transcends the fate of a single journalist: it encapsulates the ongoing struggle of Armenian genocide survivors' descendants in Turkey to live openly, mourn freely, and speak their truth without fear.

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Vartan Tashjian is a media professional and editor with almost four decades of experience in Armenian journalism and communications. He has founded and directed numerous publications and broadcast programs in Armenia and Lebanon, including the Armenian Catholic Patriarchate's Armenology Center and its flagship "Armenian Educator" magazine in Beirut. Throughout his tenure in media, Tashjian has also been instrumental in producing documentary films, educational events, and cultural initiatives, while contributing to political analysis across publications in Lebanon, Armenia, and the United States. Currently, Tashjian serves as Head of the Information Office at Mesrobian High School in Beirut, Lebanon.

There are no comments yet.