

# WHAT DAVUTOGLU FAILS TO UNDERSTAND

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By Taner Akçam, [The Armenian Weekly](#), 11 May 2010

While the ruling AK Party in Turkey continues to sing the same old tune on the genocide, it is trying out a new style. Our minister of foreign affairs, Ahmet Davutoglu, is one of those testing out this new style with the concept of "just memory."

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While the ruling AK Party in Turkey continues to sing the same old tune on the genocide, it is trying out a new style. Our minister of foreign affairs, Ahmet Davutoglu, is one of those testing out this new style with the concept of "just memory."

Davutoglu explains the concept in this way: "If Edward Nalbantyan had agreed to it that day, I had prepared a speech for after the signing... I had rested that speech upon one single concept: just memory...a key concept. In other words, to not look at that entire history from a single-sided point of view. We should be empathetic to what the Armenians lived through, what they felt, and what followed for them afterwards. But while expecting respect for their memory, they in turn should show respect for ours too. We shouldn't construct a one-sided memory... 1915 may be the year of the deportation for them. For us, it is at the same time the year of Canakkale and of Sarikamis" (Murat Yetkin, Radikal, March 26, 2010).

In the press conference organized by Davutoglu in March after the decision by the U.S. House of Representatives Committee for Foreign Affairs on the Armenian Genocide, he expressed the same ideas: "1915 represents the deportation for the Armenians but at the same time it represents Canakkale for us... It was a period of time marked by the great defense for the endurance of a nation. It was a period marked by great suffering in Anatolia. A time when two million people migrated from the Balkans and from the Caucasus. In the wake of the disintegration of an empire, chaos reigned. We have always sympathized with the suffering of that time" (see [Haber.sol](#))

What Davutoglu is trying to do is actually quite simple. He's trying to follow a kind of "balancing" policy. To put it in a nutshell: "If the Armenians had their suffering, we had ours too." It may sound like a new statement, since he seems ready to accept what happened to the Armenians in 1915. However, the precondition for accepting it is that "Muslim suffering" must be equaled with "Armenian suffering." In reality, therefore, there is nothing new in his statement. The reasoning behind "just memory" and "mutual suffering" has a second and perhaps even more important aspect to it: It views recent history as having been shaped by actors from two different sides—"Muslim" and "Christian." And these "two sides" developed different "histories and memories" in a state of conflict. This is a serious distortion of history, and for this reason it is worth taking a closer look at it.

First, the "just memory" and "mutual suffering" thesis is an extremely stale one. It's been repeated

over and over again in Turkey for years. Justin McCarthy, Sukru Elekdag's history consultant, has written books on it. It represents a violation of a simple rule that shouldn't even need to be mentioned, but here it is: You can never, ever, present civilian and military deaths that occurred during a war as equivalent to the annihilation of a population upon the orders of a party or government. This is a very ordinary denialist tactic. The fact that the civilian and military deaths during World War II in Germany far exceed the number of Jews who were destroyed is a fact known by every school child there. However, today, outside of a few leftover Nazis and some extreme German nationalists, you will not find a single German citizen opposed to acknowledging the Holocaust based on the notion of "just memory" and "we suffered too." Anyone doing that would be shamed into silence. In a similar vein, if you were to take the deaths caused by Stalin's massacres against civilians during World War II, and equate them to the losses suffered by the Soviet Army and civilian population while combating the Nazis, that would again be considered shameful. For a less known example, in the genocide perpetrated by the Hutu government against the Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994, 800,000 Tutsis were killed. If you were to compare those 800,000 deaths with the deaths of Hutus by the Tutsi independence organization called the Front for Rwanda Nationlovers (RPF), you would have again committed a grave injustice. Today the Hutu nationalists being prosecuted by the Rwanda International Criminal Court are making those very same arguments in their defense.

This tendency, unfortunately, remains unexamined in Turkey. Whenever the subject of the Armenians' annihilation in 1915 comes up, the civilian Muslim and military losses from the Caucasian and Balkan wars and World War I are presented as an equivalent. Our so-called "liberal" writers engage in the same exercise. Sometimes you can't get away from all the "mutual suffering" literature being printed everywhere. Since everyone has suffered and everyone needs to understand the other's suffering, a deep sense of "peace" settles into every corner. One can't ignore the comfort in replacing "accusations" and "conflicts" and "battles," with "harmony" and "serenity" and "understanding." Since "everyone has suffered," we gain a tremendous sense of peace by "understanding each other's pain." Therefore there is no "perpetrator" in our midst, no "malfeasor," and no "victim." We are all in the same position, so why fight? We need to accept the fact that when "someone is feeling blamed" rather deeply, turning it around and making themselves feel like the victim is actually quite comforting to them. It's a general rule: When cornered, make yourself the victim and get instant stress relief.

From this point on, when we discuss 1915 we need to get away from this statement that "All of us suffered." What we are talking about are examples of violence that carry different characteristics. Civilian and military losses during wars and the deliberate destruction of a civilian population by the decision of an administration are not crimes that can be examined on the same level, and cannot be considered equivalent. If you are going to take examples of violence with completely different causes and different results, and label them equivalent in degree, one can only conclude that you do not want to understand what happened and that you would prefer to sweep things under the rug.

Why bring up Turkish losses suffered during the war whenever the question of Armenian losses—as a result of centralized decision-making—comes up? Isn't this a rather strange exercise in logic? By taking two completely different events, different both in the players involved and their causes (in fact in the Caucasian migrations, occurring in different centuries), and placing them side by side and then asking us to consider them together, this isn't just some silly distortion of history. It is something far worse. It is trying to get us to make what the old folks used to call an "illiyet rabitasi," or "causation connection." And it wants us to place the Armenians on one side of those events—if possible, the opposing side. Fine, but there is just one simple question: What possible connection did the Armenians of Anatolia have with the Balkans or with the migration of Muslims from the Caucasus, which started around 80 years before 1915? And more importantly, wasn't the Union and Progress Party responsible for the losses suffered during World War I as well as what happened in 1915?

This question brings us to the second aspect of this issue: The softness of that phrase "We've all suffered" carries within it a deep-seated nationalism and a distortion of facts regarding our recent history. This sentiment views recent history as one marked by two separate collective actors—the "Muslim Turk" and the "Christian Armenian." The "Muslim Turk actors" and their "history and memory," and the "Christian Armenian actors" and their "history and memory," developed different "suffering" within the context of their relations, maybe with clashes with each other, according to this view. For this reason, when looking backward one shouldn't be confined to just one side's history and memory. Both sides' histories and memories need to be honored. This is a very serious distortion of history. The facts don't bear out this version of history.

This manner of thinking that Davutoglu has been trying to develop is both a manifestation of the deep-seated Muslim identity within the AKP and a reflection of another phenomenon described by the French historian Renan, that is, "a state can only be established upon the deformation of the past. One can't create a nation without deforming the past." In other words, 95 years of lies and denial politics have created this mindset of "sides" and "memories" of the issue. This mindset is where the self-belief and self-concept of the Muslim identity in Turkey meets with the secularist-nationalist interpretation of history. This is why the AKP (and Davutoglu) continue the usual denialist policies.

Let's start from the Balkan wars. The facts are really quite simple. The Balkan wars took place against the Serbian, Greek, and Bulgarian states. One quarter of the army that was mobilized by the Ottomans consisted of Christian Ottoman citizens. As Ottoman citizens, the Armenians' role in the war wasn't simply limited to serving in the army. They were active in soliciting donations for it. For example, the director of the Pangalti branch of the Mudafaa-i Milliyet Cemiyeti (Society for National Defense) was Dikran Allahverdi. Dikran bey was successful in procuring 3,000 Ottoman gold coins in donations for support of the army, which even got his name mentioned in the daily newspapers of the time. Dikran Allahverdi was one of the intellectuals who was arrested on April 24, 1915 and taken away. Now, Mr. Davutoglu, where in your "just memory" is there a place for Dikran Allahverdi? Isn't it just a little bit strange to sit there and pronounce the "Balkan Wars" as belonging to "our

memory"—meaning "Muslim memory"—and present it as a contrast to the "Armenians' history," especially what happened in 1915?

The Sarikamis example isn't very different. According to Davutoglu's "just memory," on one side is "our" (meaning "Muslim") suffering over Sarikamis, and on the other side is the Armenian suffering of 1915. Can Davutoglu explain to me why Sarikamis is on one side of history while the Armenians are on the other side? No doubt this is because of Davutoglu's version of history, which places Muslims on one side and Christians on the other side. Therefore the Muslim losses at Sarikamis get compared with the Armenian-Christian losses of 1915, and presented as "different memories."

Can there be a more meaningless "compare and contrast" method than this? Anyone with an understanding of history would realize that Sarikamis and 1915 do not represent "two different sides" that reflect "two different memories." I didn't compose the folk tune "Askeri kirdiran Enver Pasha" ("Enver Pasha Who Destroyed Soldiers"). This nation did. Enver is both the murderer of Sarikamis and the murderer of Armenians in 1915. Just a simple understanding of history would make us realize that we shouldn't contrast Sarikamis and 1915; it would remind us to record both on the crime ledgers of Enver and Talat Pasha.

Isn't this actual history? Wasn't the Union and Progress party responsible for both the Muslim losses during World War I and the murders of Armenians? With what sort of logic—and why—are two crimes of different characters enacted by the same government both treated the same and also contrasted with each other? Why place one crime by the Union and Progress Party on one side, and the other crime with the other side's pain and memory? Shouldn't we put an end to the meaninglessness that hides behind bright words like "just memory"? If Davutoglu had read the indictments of the prosecutions against the Unionists in 1919, he would have seen that the Unionists were prosecuted for these two different criminal episodes, and he would stop this strange business of comparing Sarikamis with the attempted annihilation of the Armenians in 1915.

The situation doesn't change when you consider Gallipoli. In fact, it presents a much more serious different set of historical facts. It is a situation that is symbolized in the personality of Captain Sarkis Torosyon, as related by Aydan Aktar (TARAF, March 22, 2010). The battle of Gallipoli doesn't fall neatly into different memories and suffering between "us" and "Armenians," as described by Davutoglu. Actually, it reminds us of a horrible and different reality behind it. There were Armenians fighting in the Ottoman army in both Sarikamis and Gallipoli, and when these soldiers were fighting on the battle front, their families were being deported and destroyed. Gallipoli is not marked by Muslims Turks on one side and the history and suffering of Armenians in 1915 on the other. Quite the opposite. Gallipoli stands as a history where the families of those Armenian soldiers battling in the Ottoman army were destroyed.

During the mobilization of Aug. 2, 1914, Armenian citizens between the ages of 18-45 were conscripted in the army like other citizens. After the defeat at Sarikamis on Feb. 25, 1915, by secret

orders sent personally by Enver Pasha, all the Armenians were stripped of their weapons and most were placed in labor battalions. During the deportation, these soldiers were systematically murdered. This wouldn't be limited to the murder of Armenians in the military, either. There was a much more painful aspect to this. The families of the Armenian soldiers who survived and continued serving in the army were also deported and killed. Sarkis Torosyan is not an exception. The Prime Ministerial Ottoman Archives are filled with the correspondences of Armenian soldiers serving in the army who wished to learn of the whereabouts of their deported families. Parsih, an employee of the Ministry of War's quartermaster general's department, fourth branch construction squadron; Minas Efendi, son of Nasib, a physician's assistant with the Dar-ul Muallimin Hospital, from the Bilecek community; Kiragos Efendi, the provisions official with the Jerusalem First Station Hospital; Nersis Mikailyan of Bursa; the first lieutenant Agop from Bolvadin; Aram Asador Demirjiyan of Izmit; Dikran Artun of Konya; Artin, son of Ohannes from Balikesir; Sirakan, son of Papas from Istanbul; Kirkor Efendi, son of Haji Serkis from the township of Arslanbey in the district of Izmit, are just some of the names.

I won't even bother going any deeper into the subject, knowing that these Armenian soldiers who remained alive were from western Anatolia; that not a single piece of writing can be found from the Armenians of eastern Anatolia; and that almost all of the writings one encounters date from after August 1915...

Mr. Davutoglu, does your "memory of Gallipoli" have room for the Armenian soldiers fighting in the Ottoman army and the destruction of their families?

Mr. Davutoglu, history wasn't experienced with the Muslims on one side and the Christians on the other.

Mr. Davutoglu, Gallipoli isn't "ours" and 1915 "the Armenians'." The Ottoman state and its ruling party, the Union and Progress, ruthlessly oppressed its own Muslim and Christian citizens. The Muslims perished by way of war and sickness. The Armenians were removed from Anatolia by a policy intent on destroying them. It's as simple as that. Why are you having such a hard time admitting that? Is it because you don't see the Christian-Armenians as "one of us"? Maybe that's why you still can't seem to find a resolution to the ordinary matter of the foundation properties of Christian citizens. You realize, I'm sure, that in modern terms, this is what is referred to as discrimination and racism.

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