

1915 & 2016: Turkey and the Road to Genocide

Friday 25 November 2016, by [BAJALAN Djene Rhys](#) (Date first published: 23 November 2016).

There are frightening parallels between the Armenian genocide and the situation of Kurds in Turkey today.

Contents

- [Erdoğan and the Kurds](#)
- [Racialization of the Kurdish](#)

On Sunday, April 24, 1915, Ottoman minister of the interior, Talat Pasha [1], ordered the arrest and detention of Armenian community leaders residing within the empire. On the first night of the sweep over two hundred individuals were picked up by government forces; as the days wore on the number grew to over two thousand. Talat Pasha's "decapitation" strike against the Ottoman Armenians was part of a broader and more systematic campaign of genocide directed at the empire's Armenian community — a campaign which left between 800,000 and 1.5 million dead.

It is not necessary here to re-litigate the question of whether or not the events of 1915 — described in official Turkish sources euphemistically as the "relocations (*tehcir*)" — constituted genocide. Instead, in remembering the Armenian genocide and, more specifically, the arrests of "Red Sunday," it becomes possible to situate the policies of Turkey's present-day leaders [2] towards representatives of the Kurdish movement — in particular, the detention of the leaders of pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, on November 4 — in a broader historical context.

While it would be hyperbolic to claim that the levels of violence currently being directed at Turkey's Kurdish population today have reached the same magnitude as that directed against the Armenians just over a century ago, undeniable and frightening parallels can nevertheless be drawn.

Erdoğan and the Kurds

It was not so long ago that Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was lauded for his (relatively) progressive stance vis-à-vis Kurdish rights in Turkey. Since the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, the "Kurdish question" — the conflict between Turkish nationalist elites in Ankara and those claiming to represent the authentic national will of Turkey's Kurds — has constituted one of the country's primary sources of political instability.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the young republic faced a number of nationalist-inspired Kurdish rebellions, most notably the Sheikh Said Rebellion of 1925 and the Hoybûn Revolt of 1929-1931. The stance taken by the administration of Turkey's founding father, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was one of suppression and denial. The republican government went to enormous lengths to crush Kurdish resistance; for example, in 1925 fully one-third of the government budget was directed toward the

military suppression of Sheikh Said's insurgency.

Yet despite the intensity of violence deployed by the state during the 1920s and 1930s, the Kurdish question was never truly resolved. Beginning in the 1940s and 1950s a new generation of Kurdish intellectuals and activists began to mobilize in a process that culminated with the foundation of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (better known by its Kurdish acronym the PKK) in 1978 [3], an organization dedicated to national liberation of not only Turkey's Kurds, but Kurds across the Middle East.

Subsequently, Turkey's predominately Kurdish Southeast was plunged into a state of civil war. Between 1978 and the arrest of the PKK's founder Abdullah Öcalan in 1999 thirty thousand lives were lost and roughly forty thousand Kurdish villages destroyed. Throughout these years of conflict, the Turkish government maintained that there was no "Kurdish issue"; instead government officials framed the conflict in terms of the struggle against terrorism (and, if pushed, economic development). As Prime Minister Tansu Çiller stated during a 1995 interview with Daniel Pipes: "There is no Kurdish insurrection in Turkey. The terrorists of the PKK are attacking innocent civilians in the southeastern part of my country without sparing women, children, or the elderly."

However, the electoral success of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002 and Erdoğan's ascent to the premiership (a position he held until his election as president in 2014), marked a subtle but distinctive shift in official policy toward the Kurds. In the summer of 2005, then prime minister Erdoğan traveled to Diyarbakir, a bastion of Kurdish nationalism, and proclaimed that the Kurdish issue was his issue and a collective problem for Turkey, confessing that, in the past, "mistakes have been made." [4]

These statements were followed by a raft of measures easing restrictions on expression of Kurdish culture. Provisions were made to allow Kurdish to be taught in language schools and universities, state television opened a channel broadcasting in Kurdish, and, in 2009, the government announced the so-called "Kurdish opening," a process which Minister of Interior Beşir Atalay claimed would solve the Kurdish question through "more freedom and more democracy." [5] Indeed, by 2013, Hakan Fidan, the head of Turkey's powerful National Intelligence Agency, was even in talks with imprisoned PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, with a view to ending the longer-running Kurdish insurgency.

Of course many of the promised reforms remained largely theoretical and Kurdish activism remained a risky business. In December 2009, the Democratic Society Party (DTP), the HDP's predecessor, was shut down by Turkey's constitutional court on the grounds that it was a front for "terrorism." Moreover, the government's contacts with Abdullah Öcalan possessed neither a clear legal standing or a defined objective. Nevertheless, by early 2010, it seemed that Turkey was edging ever so slowly towards some kind of resolution of the country's "Kurdish question."

In retrospect, it seems apparent that Erdoğan's opening towards the Kurds was born not out of any strongly held conviction that the country's Kurdish population had been the victims of a historical injustice, but a base desire to win Kurdish votes. In the short term, this proved to be successful, with the AKP increasing its share of the vote in the Kurdish Southeast in the general election of 2007. However, in the local elections of 2009 many Kurds, frustrated with the slow pace of reform, abandoned the AKP, leading to the party's failure to take control of the Diyarbakir municipal government from the pro-Kurdish DTP. [6]

Sluggish reforms also boosted the popularity of the parliamentary wing of the Kurdish movement, which, in 2014, coalesced into a new party, the HDP. The HDP was able to capitalize on the revulsion felt by many Kurds (including the more conservative elements of Kurdish society which

had generally been sympathetic towards the AKP) towards Erdoğan's view of the Syrian Kurdish movement, which had come to political prominence following the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011.

In the fall of 2014 as Syrian Kurdish fighters tried to defend the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobanê from the forces of the Islamic State [7], Turkish authorities refused to allow Kurds from Turkey to cross the border to assist Kobanê's defenders, despite the fact that those same authorities had been more than willing to turn a blind eye to a steady flow of jihadists into Syria from Turkish territory. Passions were further inflamed when Erdoğan (now president) proclaimed, with apparent cold indifference, that Kobanê was "on the verge of falling." A wave of protests spread across Turkey, and were brutally suppressed by the Turkish authorities.

The HDP's popularity also increased as a result of its relatively progressive stance towards economics, LGBT rights, and the environment. Such stances helped it to build support among liberal and leftist Turks, many of whom had participated in or been sympathetic to the Gezi Park protests in 2013. Thus, under the co-leadership of Demirtaş, an ethnic Kurd from Elazığ, and Figen Yüksekdağ, an ethnic Turk from Adana, the party was able to construct an electoral coalition that included not only Kurds, but Turkish liberals, leftists, environmentalists, and LGBT rights activists. Granted, the party's base remained overwhelmingly Kurdish, but in the June 2015 parliamentary elections, this coalition was able to propel the HDP past the 10 percent electoral threshold, a barrier that in previous elections had denied pro-Kurdish parties adequate parliamentary representation (HDP won 13.1 percent).

The HDP's electoral success, which came mainly at the expense of the AKP, was a direct challenge to Erdoğan's growing power, and seemingly put an end to his ambitions to rewrite the 1982 Turkish constitution and establish a strong executive presidency (Turkey is a parliamentary system). Almost as soon as the results of the election were in a new military offensive was launched against the PKK.

The immediate trigger for the renewal of violence was the bombing, most likely orchestrated by the Islamic State, of a group of students who had gathered at Suruç on the Turco-Syrian border to support Kurdish fighters in Syria. Soon after, Turkish security forces clashed with Kurdish fighters in Adıyaman and Ceylanpınar, leaving three soldiers dead. Although the PKK denied being involved in the fighting, these deaths opened a space for a renewed government assault on the PKK. Under the cover of pursuing the Islamic State, the Turkish air force attacked PKK positions in Iraq.

Meanwhile, within Turkey's borders, authorities clashed with Kurdish militants in towns and cities across the Southeast. By the spring of 2016, this new round of violence had, according to Turkish authorities, cost the lives of 4,571 Kurdish fighters, 450 soldiers and police, and at least 338 civilians. The material losses were equally as great with many Kurdish towns reduced to rubble and ruins, festooned with Turkish flags.

Despite stoking nationalist sentiment among the Turkish public, these clashes did not spell the end of the HDP. A second election held in November 2015 saw the HDP's vote share drop, but not below the 10 percent electoral threshold. In fact, in terms of parliamentary seats, the HDP overtook the far-right National Action Party (MHP), becoming the third largest parliamentary party.

However, in the aftermath of the failed July 15 coup d'état, the political landscape in Turkey is rapidly shifting. Erdoğan has used the political chaos to further consolidate his power, assaulting the remaining bastions of opposition in the media, bureaucracy, academia and, of course, the Kurdish movement.

Kurdish media sources, including Dicle News Agency, *Azadiya Welat* (Free Nation), and *Evrensel*

Kültür (Universal Culture), have been shut down [8]. HDP local government leaders have also been rounded up, including the co-mayors of Diyarbakir, Gültan Kışanak and Fırat Anlı. Perhaps one of the most significant government moves has been the legal assault on the HDP's parliamentary delegation.

In May 2016, two months prior to the abortive coup d'état the Turkish parliament voted to remove the parliamentary immunity of HDP members [9], a move supported by not only the AKP but also Turkey's largest opposition party, the Kemalist People's Republican Party (CHP). On the night of November 4 Turkish authorities made use of that new power to, in effect, "decapitate" the Kurdish movement; a move eerily reminiscent of Talat Pasha's strike against the Armenian intelligentsia 101 years earlier.

Just as the "Young Turks" used the cover of World War I to "solve" the Armenian question, Erdoğan seems to be using the post-coup to "clean up" Kurdish opposition.

Racialization of the Kurdish Conflict

One significant, but often ignored, aspect of developments pertaining to Turkey's "Kurdish question" is the gradual shift over the last decade towards the institutionalization of the Kurdish identity in Turkey. At first glance, this might seem to be a positive development. However, as the Turkish Republic has moved towards recognition, albeit only implicitly, that the Kurds constitute a distinctive community, the Kurdish community has, paradoxically, become more vulnerable to targeted violence.

In this regard, the comparison with the Armenian case is particularly relevant. Despite the efforts of successive generations of Ottoman reformers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to forge an Ottoman "nation" through establishing a common set of rights and responsibilities for all Ottoman subjects regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliations, ethno-communal identities remained a persistent feature of late Ottoman politics. This was particularly true of predominantly non-Muslim communities like the Armenians who enjoyed a type of official recognition due to the existence of the so-called millet system, an administrative structure that afforded religious minorities a form of legal autonomy.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, this institutional autonomy was bolstered by the emergence of a lively Armenian political movement that pushed (sometimes through violent revolutionary activity) for recognition of Armenian national rights (although not necessarily national independence). Ottoman political elites increasingly regarded the Armenian community not as potential Ottoman "citizens," but as an existential threat to imperial unity — a fifth column actively working to undermine the Ottoman political order.

This tendency was exacerbated by the proliferation of social-Darwinist ideas among the leadership of the Committee of Union and Progress (better known in the West as the Young Turks), a secretive cabal of military officers and officials who led the Ottoman Empire during World War I. This tendency served to racialize a community which, historically, had been understood primarily in religious terms. As Dr Nazim, a member of the CUP's Special Organization (*Teşkilât-ı Mahsusat*), a semi-official intelligence organization directly responsible for the brutalities meted out against the Armenians, stated at a CUP meeting in 1915:

"If we remain satisfied . . . with local massacres . . . if this purge is not general and final, it will inevitably lead to problems. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary to eliminate the Armenian people in its entirety, so there is no further Armenian on this earth and the very concept of Armenia is

extinguished . . .”

Thus, even conversion to Islam (a move that had saved many Armenians from death during an earlier set of pogroms in the mid 1890s), was not enough to save hapless Armenian villagers from deportation to the Syrian desert or murder.

How then might we compare the situation of the Armenians a century ago with the situation of the Kurds today?

The attitude of political elites in republican Turkey towards the Kurds has, historically, been somewhat different from the attitude displayed towards the Armenians by the architects of the genocide. This is not to suggest that racialized notions of ethnic identity have not been significant in republican Turkey. The Settlement Law of 1934 provided the legal mechanisms for the deportation of those of non-Turkish “culture” from their homes; a law used to great effect to deport Kurds and other “undesirables,” such as the Jews of Thrace [10].

At the same time, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s government was more than willing to tolerate the activities of Turkish racial supremacists such as Nihal Atsız, an individual who repackaged Nazi propaganda for Turkish consumption and described Turkish nationality as “a matter of blood.” On a more popular level, Kurds were often regarded by Turks as being a bestial people, dark-skinned, dirty, and betailed.

However, official “Kemalist” discourse did not recognize the Kurds as a distinct people. They were described as “mountain Turks”; a people who were of Turkish origins, but who had come to speak a form of “broken Persian” (Kurdish, like Persian, is an Indo-Iranian language). Thus, Turkey’s policy towards the Kurds was often dictated by the notion that Kurdishness was a form of false consciousness and that any manifestation of Kurdish political discontent was the result of foreign agitation.

Thus Kurds were regarded by Kemalist elites as being, to borrow a term from scholar Mesut Yeğen [11] “prospective Turks”; a community which could, through education, be drawn into the circle of modern Turkish “civilization.” Indeed, Kemalist nationalists, with the almost pathological obsession with utilizing Mustafa Kemal’s sayings, often sought to deny the ethnic exclusivity of Turkish nationalism by highlighting a statement made by Turkey’s founder: “Happy is he who calls himself a Turk” not “Happy is he who is a Turk”; a point used to demonstrate the apparent inclusiveness of the Turkish identity.

Of course assimilationist “civic nationalisms,” such as the variety of Turkish nationalism expounded by secular-orientated Kemalists, are often no less pernicious than so-called ethnic nationalism (if indeed a firm division between these two categories can even be made). The Kemalist civilizing mission, aptly described by Welat Zeydanoğlu as the “Turkish White Man’s Burden,” resulted in the repression of the Kurdish language, the arrest of Kurdish activists, and policies such as the mass abduction of Kurdish children and their forcible internment in government boarding schools.

Nevertheless, the Turkish state’s denial of the Kurdish existence also insulated Kurds from an out-and-out genocidal assault. While violence against specific communities of Kurds did, at times, reach genocidal proportions — most notably during the Dersim campaign of 1937 and 1938 — so long as Kurds were regarded as “potential” Turks, the total physical eradication of the Kurdish community remained off the agenda. After all, how could one destroy a nation that the state refuses to accept exists?

The situation has evolved under the AKP. The partial and imperfect official recognition of the Kurds

as a distinct community over the past decade has ironically created conditions in which genocide against the Kurds of Turkey is now, if not necessarily likely, possible.

Writing in 2009, Mesut Yeğen observed that the “status of Kurds vis-a-vis Turkishness is on the brink of a major change.” Yeğen’s point was that the popular belief that Kurds could become Turkish was in decline; in its place was an emergent new narrative emanating both from the Turkish Armed Forces and the nationalist press which portrayed the Kurds as pseudo-citizens (*sözde vatandaşlar*) and often linked them to communities long regarded as being outside the circle of Turkishness through the use of terms like Jewish-Kurds or Armenian-Kurds.

The tendency towards viewing the Kurds as a clearly defined “other” to the Turk has been inadvertently strengthened by official concessions (however halfhearted and superficial) to the Kurdish identity. It is now impossible for Turkish political leaders to return to the policy of denial that, for much of Turkey’s modern history, has defined the official attitude towards the Kurds. Instead, the Kurds are now regarded by government circles, and large sections of the Turkish public, as ingrates who despite government efforts remain bent on destroying the country.

Thus, collective punishment of the type visited upon the Armenians a century ago is — perhaps for the first time in the history of modern Turkey — now possible. Like the Armenians in 1915, the Kurds have emerged as a new “other” — a group distinguishable from the Turkish majority.

In this regard, the arrest of the co-leaders of the HDP, as well as hundreds of other Kurdish intellectuals and activists, looks strikingly similar to Talat Pasha’s efforts to “decapitate” the Armenian community. Apologists for Erdoğan may well seek to frame these arrests in terms of the “war on terrorism”; especially when justifying its actions to the United States and Europe.

However, the statements of Minister for Economic Affairs Nihat Zeybekçi, in which he likened HDP members to “rats,” hints at the racist and dehumanizing attitudes maintained by Turkey’s governing elite. Such statements, made at a time in which military conflict between the PKK and the Turkish army are escalating, only serve to harden the ideological frontiers separating Kurds from Turks and, in doing so, may well be laying the foundations for a hitherto unprecedented campaign of violence against Turkey’s Kurdish population.

Will this result in genocide? It is perhaps too early to tell. But this is 2016, a year in which many things once thought impossible have become all too real.

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P.S.

* Jacobin. 11.23.16:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/11/turkey-kurds-erdogan-armenia-genocide-hdp-pkk/>

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Footnotes

- [1] <https://global.britannica.com/biography/Talat-Pasa>
- [2] ESSF (article 39566), [Turkey's Fascist Slide – "All-out resistance is urgently necessary"](#).
- [3] ESSF (article <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article37467>), <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/...>
- [4] <http://articles.latimes.com/2005/aug/13/world/fg-turkey13>
- [5] <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-govt-vows-more-democracy-to-solve-kurdish-issue.aspx?pageID=438&n=gov8217t-vows-more-democracy-to-solve-kurd-problem-2009-07-29>
- [6] <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-elections-kurds-idUSTRE52T4G420090330>
- [7] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/10/solidarity-with-kobane/>
- [8] <http://aranews.net/2016/11/hrw-condemns-turkeys-crackdown-media-kurds/>
- [9] <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-politics-immunity-idUSKCN0YB0VC>
- [10] <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00313220600634238?journalCode=rpop20&>
- [11] https://www.jstor.org/stable/20622956?seq=1#fndtn-page_scan_tab_contents