

Armenians and the Legacies of World War I

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Introduction

On May 13, 2015, the Center on the United States and Europe at the Brookings Institution, the Center for International Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the Hrant Dink Memorial Human Rights and Justice Lectureship at MIT, and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace held a conference on the Armenian genocide at the Brookings Institution in Washington D.C. The aim of the conference was to inform public debate on the evolution of the Armenian genocide. Conference panelists represented a diversity of expertise and experience, but all shared in their scholarly approach to examining the events of 1915 and the critical issues affecting Armenia today.

The conference consisted of three panels covering a range of historical and political topics. The first session, “1915 and the Unmaking of Peoples: Deportations, Massacres, and Genocide,”¹ focused on the historical events of 1915 and the processes of massacre and genocide that characterized the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The second session, “The Making of an ‘Almost Intractable Conflict’ and Attempts at its Resolution,”² examined the history of Turkish-Armenian relations and the prospects for normalization between the two countries. The third session, “2015 and its Horrors: A Century After 1915,”³ attempted to connect the past to the present in discussion of reconciliation, collective memory, and current genocide studies scholarship.

The comments of conference panelists converged on three thematic questions: first, the question of whether or not scholars and policymakers should view the Armenian genocide of 1915 and Turkish-Armenian relations today as standalone issues or as part of larger regional and international

¹ The first session was chaired by Thomas de Waal of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Panelists included Taner Akçam of Clark University, Lerna Ekmekçioglu of MIT, and David Gaunt of Södertörn University.

² The second session was chaired by Kemal Kirişçi. Panelists included Thomas de Waal of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Gerard Libaridian, historian and former Senior Advisor to the President of Armenia, Mitat Çelikpala of Kadir Has University, and D. Nigar Göksel of the International Crisis Group and editor in chief of *Turkish Policy Quarterly*.

³ The third session was chaired by Lily Gardner Feldman of Johns Hopkins University. Panelists included Catherine Guisan of the University of Minnesota, Ömer Taşpınar of the National War College and the Brookings Institution, Arman Grigoryan of Lehigh University, and Hisham Melhem of Al Arabiya News Channel.

dynamics; second, the question of whether or not the Armenian genocide is unique or is comparable to other atrocities including the Holocaust; and third, the question of whether or not continued conflict over the historical narrative of the events of 1915 will impede progress on reconciliation.

Theme 1: *Viewing the Armenian Genocide as Broader Process, Then and Now*

Several panelists suggested that the Armenian genocide and Turkish-Armenian relations today should be viewed as part of broader regional and international dynamics.

Scholars discussing the historical events of 1915 argued that the Armenian genocide must be analyzed within the context of wider processes in the Ottoman Empire, in the region, and in the world at the time. For example, Taner Akçam argued that the Armenian genocide should not be viewed as an isolated event in 1915, but rather as a longer process that started in 1878 with the Treaty of Berlin and ended by 1923 with the signing of the Lausanne Agreement. He noted that throughout this extended period of time, several massacres of Armenians were just one component of a much larger Ottoman repression of Christian communities that included Greeks, Macedonians, and, as discussed in detail by David Gaunt, Assyrians. Professor Akçam further suggested that the genocide be viewed within the context of Ottoman decline and within the context of foreign intervention on Armenian reform issues. Understanding the external pressures on the Ottoman Empire throughout this period, he argued, is crucial to understanding the history of the genocide. Such state instability is in fact often a precursor to mass atrocity, as highlighted by Arman Grigoryan's review of genocide studies scholarship.

In their discussion of Turkish-Armenian relations in the wake of the genocide, Gerard Libaridian, D. Nigar Göksel, and Mitat Çelikpala similarly argued that a lack of progress between Turkey and Armenia is best understood in the context of broader regional and international dynamics. Libaridian focused his comments on the role of Russia, asserting that Armenian reliance on Russia is a direct result of Armenian fears of a Turkish threat. Çelikpala agreed that true Armenian independence from Moscow will depend on improved Turkish-Armenian relations. Libaridian, Göksel, and Çelikpala also suggested that the linkage of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue to Turkish-Armenian negotiations, most notably during discussions of the 2009 Protocols, has had detrimental effects on the reconciliation process. Finally, Çelikpala and Grigoryan argued that increased internationalization of the Armenian genocide recognition issue has had the perverse consequence of increasing tension between Armenia and Turkey.

In sum, panelists agreed that understanding the politics of the Armenian genocide, in 1915 and today, requires a broad examination of regional and international processes. The Armenian genocide of 1915 and Turkish-Armenian relations cannot be understood devoid of this important context.

Theme 2: The Uniqueness of the Armenian Genocide

A second theme of the conference centered on debates concerning the uniqueness of the Armenian genocide. Throughout the day, panelists and audience members questioned whether or not the massacres of Armenians in 1915 could be compared to the Holocaust and whether or not comparisons to the Holocaust were beneficial for furthering recognition of the Armenian genocide and for advancing Turkish-Armenian relations.

Several historians noted unique aspects of the Armenian genocide. For example, Lerna Ekmekçioğlu discussed the unusual Ottoman policy of transferring and assimilating Armenian women and children into Turkish-Muslim households. She argued that a significant difference between the Holocaust and the Armenian genocide was thus the ability of some women and children to survive the atrocities by becoming a part of the perpetrating group. Taner Akçam suggested that in addition to the collection and distribution of Armenian children and women, the Armenian genocide differed from the Holocaust in that anyone who converted to Islam could survive and a limited policy of Armenian resettlement in Syria and Iraq, from May, 1915 until November, 1915, allowed for some respite from the massacres.

The role of parallels between the Holocaust and the Armenian genocide was also raised in discussions of Turkish-Armenian reconciliation. Ömer Taşpınar argued that comparisons to the Holocaust are detrimental because, in contrast to the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide is a more ambiguous case, presumably due to Ottoman concerns about Armenian reform demands during this period. Further, he argued, much of Turkish aversion to using the word genocide in describing the Armenian massacres stems from a Turkish reluctance to equate the events of 1915 with the Holocaust. Yet, Gerard Libaridian countered these comments by suggesting that although the Holocaust and the Armenian genocide may be different in that Turkish officials resolved an internal political problem by decimating their Armenian population, the fact that the massacre of Armenians solved a political problem does not make the killings less of a genocide.

In short, although the Armenian genocide had several unique characteristics that differed from aspects of the Holocaust, the consensus position was that such particularities did not preclude the massacres from meeting the legal definition of genocide and that avoiding the truth of the events by diluting the terminology would be a regressive step in the reconciliation process.

Theme 3: *Historical Narrative and Reconciliation*

A third theme of the conference centered on competing historical narratives and their relationship to the reconciliation process. In discussing this subject, panelists focused their comments first on how differing assignments of relative responsibility for the massacres have impeded progress on genocide recognition and Turkish-Armenian relations and second on the relationship of atrocities against Muslims to historical understandings of the Armenian genocide.

Conference discussion suggested that competing historical narratives on Turkish responsibility in the Armenian genocide have slowed progress on genocide recognition and reconciliation. Thomas de Waal argued that several narratives have in fact emerged in the wake of 1915, with varying degrees of recognition and denial over time. Although levels of recognition and denial have fluctuated, Mitat Çelikpala explained that most Turks still believe that the Armenian massacres were committed as part of a counterinsurgency response during a period of war when many people perished throughout the region. Ömer Taşpinar similarly noted that a majority of Turks do not feel a sense of collective guilt for the Armenian massacres, but rather feel a sense of collective victimhood for being targeted as perpetrators. Panelists asserted that for Armenians, on the other hand, the genocide is a historical fact that should not be diminished in the history books.

Other scholars questioned whether massacres of Muslim populations in the Balkans during this period need to be included in historical narratives of the Armenian genocide. Ömer Taşpinar asserted that Turks have come to view discussions of the Armenian genocide as representative of Islamophobia and believe that atrocities against Muslims in the Balkans have been largely ignored. Professor Taşpinar made a related point in arguing that using the word genocide to describe the atrocities committed against Muslims in the Balkans would lessen Turkish aversion to the term in the Armenian case. However, other participants noted that historians, commentators, and policymakers should take care to ensure that recognition of massacres against Muslims in the Balkans does not occur at the expense of assigning moral responsibility for the Armenian genocide. For example, Taner Akçam emphasized that although it is important to incorporate all massacres

into a historical narrative of World War I, the mention of other atrocities too often serves as an argument against the existence of the Armenian genocide. Thomas de Waal similarly argued that though accounts of Russian and Armenian violence against Muslims are necessary to construct an honest historical narrative, a candid history is unlikely to emerge while Turkish denial of the Armenian genocide continues.

The panelists concluded that, though difficult to obtain, an honest historical narrative would be critical to the reconciliation process in the coming years. Gerard Libaridian hoped that Turkish and Armenian parties, as well as historians, can focus on areas of shared historical agreement, which could lay the groundwork for future progress. Mitat Çelikpala argued that some progress has been made in this area already, with Turkey now increasingly referring to the World War I period as one of “common pain.” Moving forward, Catherine Guisan suggested that examples of conflict resolution processes in South Africa and postwar Germany might provide lessons on the effectiveness of truth-telling, atonement, and reparation. Hisham Melhem noted that while assigning moral responsibility will be necessary to the reconciliation process, parties should seek to avoid inherited collective guilt, which could lead to cycles of violence in which various ethnic, religious, or national groups seek revenge for wrongs committed against their ancestors.

In sum, divergent historical narratives continue to impede progress on genocide recognition and Turkish-Armenian relations. Turks still believe that they are being unfairly singled out for massacres committed during World War I while Armenians cannot move forward in the presence of continued genocide denial. Future progress will likely require convergence toward shared points of historical agreement and a durable process of reconciliation.

Conclusion

To conclude, the panelists’ comments focused on three general thematic areas: first, the broader historical, regional, and international dynamics of the 1915 events and of Turkish-Armenian relations today; second, the uniqueness of the Armenian genocide and the comparability of the genocide to other atrocities; finally, competing historical narratives and their relationship to the reconciliation process. On the first issue, panelists concluded that the politics of the Armenian genocide must be viewed in the context of more systematic international forces present during the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and in Turkish-Armenian relations today, particularly as Russia, Azerbaijan, and other states seek to shape Turkish-Armenian negotiations. On the second issue,

panelists largely agreed that the Armenian genocide did have certain unique characteristics, but that such uniqueness, and difference from the Holocaust, did not prevent the Armenian massacres from constituting genocide. On the third issue, all agreed that competing historical narratives continue to impede Turkish-Armenian reconciliation. Most panelists suggested that future progress will require Turkish parties to accept responsibility for the Armenian genocide and all parties to focus on areas of historical agreement in building a shared narrative of the events of 1915.