

Stalemate in the Armenian genocide debate: the role of identity in Turkish diasporic political engagement

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The concept of diasporic engagement revolves around the idea that migrant groups can impact political and developmental projects. This entices policymakers because, among other reasons, it suggests migrants can be used as overseas lobbyists for their countries of heritage. However, the research I conducted as part of the ODP demonstrates that the potential of migrants to effectively engage with the politics of their countries of residence is limited. It further suggests that heritage-country control of migrant political activism is difficult to achieve. Even when the agendas of migrant activists and the country of heritage seem to harmonise, the motivations of the former appear to be rooted more in identity and personal experience than in concern for the politics of the latter.

My research focused on the conflict between Turkish-Americans, Armenian-Americans, and their respective allies over official recognition of the massacres and deportations of ethnic Armenians by the Ottoman forces in 1915 as genocide. The stakes are symbolically if not materially high, as the question of genocide is integral to the identities of both groups. For a large number of Armenian-Americans, many of whom descend from individuals who escaped the Ottoman Empire during the First World War, the events of 1915 are a central reference point in their understanding of history. The characterisation of the events of 1915 as genocide is fundamental to Armenian nationalist discourses, and the pursuit of genocide recognition is stated in the Armenian Declaration of Independence to be a core goal of the Republic of Armenia.

Turkish-Americans, who by-and-large were educated in Turkey,

received a very different history. The events of 1915 remained largely untaught in the decades after the war. It was only when renewed calls for recognition in the 1970s and 1980s mixed with the violence of a new generation of Armenian militants that Turkey began to develop a narrative of its own (Dixon 2010). Caught on the defensive, historians commissioned by the Turkish government constructed a strongly nationalist discourse that rejected all accusations of genocide. This narrative describes the events of 1915 as an unfortunate but legitimate response to a seditious and separatist internal population by a beleaguered state at war (Suny 2009). This framing of events now sits in diametric opposition to Armenian demands for recognition. Just as Armenian narratives weave the events of 1915 into the identities of many Armenians, Turkish narratives inscribe an instinctual opposition to recognition onto the identities of many Turks. This stance often becomes more pronounced when Turkish citizens move overseas, where their suddenly non-majoritarian views are more likely to be challenged.

The combination of Armenian and Turkish nationalisms and identities in the US has proved vitriolic. It has transformed an essentially historical or legal question – whether or not the events of 1915 constitute genocide using the internationally accepted definition found in the UN Convention on Genocide – into a political issue in the US. Nearly every year a recognition resolution is tabled in Congress. The fight that inevitably ensues pits two passionate diasporas against each other, attracts intense involvement from Ankara and Yerevan, and draws in the US President as well as members of Congress. As such, the recognition debate is an excellent case study for examining the ways in which diasporas act as extensions of their governments of heritage, pursue their own agendas, and affect policy in their countries of residence.

Turkish migrant politics and the recognition debate

The US, according to census figures, is home to around 170,000 Turkish migrants. My study focused on those living in Washington, D.C., the centre of American politics and epicentre of the recognition debate. Many of the Turkish-American organisations there are active in this area, expending great effort to prevent Congressional

recognition and to inhibit the (further) institutionalisation of the genocide label in American statute and discourse. Among other activities, they sponsor alternative publications, collect money for political campaigns, supply Turkish-American interns to government offices, and sue government entities (e.g. school boards) for treating the genocide narrative as fact.

Organisational leaders furthermore work to increase support amongst 'ordinary' Turkish-Americans. They are rhetoric-heavy with the themes of anti-Turkish racism and prejudice to cast recognition as an indictment of *all Turks* as *genocidaires*. They therefore argue that Turkish-Americans should resist the appellation of genocide, not so much because it is an inaccurate characterisation, but because it will be a source of shame. This message combines memories of the hate crimes of the 1970s and 1980s – groups such as the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) and the Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide (JCAG) bombed Turkish businesses and assassinated many Turkish citizens during this period – with the abundant anti-Turkish hate speech found on the internet and elsewhere, to form a potent cocktail of fear and personal insult.

There is a genuine belief among many, but not all, Turkish-Americans that the fight is about protecting their *identities* as Turks. Such sentiment harmonises with Turkey's official policy and is therefore encouraged by the Turkish state. However, it is important to recognise that the popular sentiment powering their resistance exists because of personal understandings of identity and history. As such, this home-grown opposition to the recognition debate exists as a largely *autonomous* agenda that is pursued by Turkish-Americans themselves independent of direction from Ankara.

Active, yet largely ineffective

Despite all this, my research found that Turkish-American activists actually *accomplish* very little. Media analysis showed their voices were entirely absent from American print media coverage of the recognition bill tabled in 2009. Turkish-American political action committees fail to attract a wide donor base, and their reported campaign contributions seem insufficient for swaying votes. Indeed, without Ankara's promise of retribution against America – including

threats to shut down airbases vital to American military adventures in the Arab world – the bill would have likely sailed through Congress with scant regard for the sensitivities of Turkish-Americans. Thirty eight states had passed more than 110 statements of Recognition by 2008 (Evinch 2008), and any cursory evaluation of American media reveals a strong message that Turks are being futilely obstinate in their refusal to concede the point.

But those fighting from the Turkish perspective are not attempting to win this battle. Their more modest goal is to not lose it entirely. To maintain the controversy is therefore, in a sense, to win. The Armenian-American lobby has, despite widespread sympathy in the US for their position, superior numbers and financing, and 40 years of tabling recognition bills, failed to surmount the realpolitik considerations of US officials to attain recognition. Thus in the recognition debate, Turkish-American activists, with no small help from Ankara's own efforts, have succeeded. □

References

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