

Letters from Istanbul
About the Apology Campaign
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The old Turkish movies had a common pattern: There were the good ones and the evil ones. Life was much easier for the audience back then. They knew whom to applaud and whom to condemn, where to feel sorry, where to rejoice and where to get angry. In that world, the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the evil, the banal and the noble are distinct categories that do not interact. Although the old Turkish movies have long become a topic of mockery for many in Turkey, the pattern of reasoning along such dichotomies of good and bad, right and wrong, friend and enemy, and the attitude of ignoring the complexities and focusing on what seems simple to us is still at work to varying degrees in our hearts and in our minds. This does not mean that everything is blurred. No doubt that we have our clear "yes" and "no," things we categorically reject or wholeheartedly support. It's just that the greater part of life is too complex to be a black and white story.

And truth is not monolithic. There may be truth in two opposite arguments. Perhaps this is why every "wrong" has to put one leg on some aspect of the "right." Otherwise it would be absurd, not "wrong." What made me ponder on these complexities of life and individual situations was my position vis-à-vis the recent apology campaign initiated by a group of Turkish intellectuals. The campaign unleashed public expressions of anti-Armenian sentiments. Panel discussions on various TV channels on this subject are very popular these days. Every day, you can see prominent denialists doing their best to prove that the deportations were a necessary measure against Armenian treachery, saying Armenians did this, Armenians did that, citing names of places, referring to "fedayis" who committed crimes. What is much more horrible than the articulation of this argument by a couple of well-known denialists is the fact that they know the Turkish people will buy their lies. They know that only a handful of people knows that nearly all able-bodied men were in labor battalions, and that there were almost only elderly men, women and children to deport—and massacre. At that time they were far from being a threat to the military. And the activities of Armenian revolutionaries, or the fedayis, were much less influential than today's PKK—and even for the most fascist minds, deporting the Kurdish population and killing them en masse on grounds of the existence and activities of PKK is out of the question (in fact, only the late retired diplomat Gündüz Aktan insinuated the need for such a "final solution" for the Kurdish question in his article published in the "progressive" Radical newspaper where he was a regular columnist.)

These prominent denialists feel so free to say what they please in front of television audiences because they know that the overwhelming majority in their country is far from being aware of simple facts related to the fate of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. They also do not feel any moral obligation towards their fellow Armenian citizens, whom they present as the descendents of these treacherous Armenians—and not as the descendents of a great civilization. They are so self-confident because they know that this knowledge has been successfully concealed generation after generation. Amidst a chorus of condemnation from politicians, pseudo NGOs, or the counter-campaigns of grassroots denialists calling for Armenians to apologize for Turks and not the other way around, we have Canan Aritman, a deputy of CHP, the main opposition party, attributing the Turkish President's initial neutral stance towards the apology campaign to the alleged secret ethnic origin of his mother. Again, what is more horrible than this statement is the fact that it is taken for granted on the part of the general public that having an Armenian parentage, regardless of whether

or not the individual has converted to Islam, is shameful and needs to be concealed.

Under these circumstances, under such audacious attacks, I am violently, furiously, passionately on the side of that thousands of people who put their signatures under the apology statement. And this, this passion is one of the fundamental reasons of my existence. However I didn't put my signature under that statement. This is the moment, the particular point where I feel most strongly what I said at the start of my writing: Truth is fragmented, not monolithic. I didn't sign it because the campaign has different implications at different levels. On the one hand, it provided a means for thousands of people in Turkey to express what they feel about the injustices done to their fellow Armenians, which is very valuable. But on the other hand, in addition to the specific wording of the statement offering the term "medz yeghern" or the "great catastrophe" as an alternative to the word Genocide, we now hear some of the initiators of the campaign trying to use the apology as a means to fight the use of the word Genocide and hamper the work of those who seek the recognition of the Armenian Genocide. They portray those seeking recognition as the twin sisters and brothers of the Turkish fascists, and they present the "Diaspora" as the enemy of any reconciliation. I know that the initiators of the campaign have become a target of harsh criticism and death threats by Turkish nationalists, and that they are the prominent advocates of more democracy and greater freedoms.

But this does not change the fact that by their discourse, they contribute to the demonization of those who do use of the word Genocide. For example, Baskin Oran, in an interview published in the daily Milliyet on Dec. 19, 2008, said, "The Prime Minister should be grateful for our campaign. Parliaments around the world were passing Genocide resolutions one after other automatically. This will stop now. The Diaspora has softened. The international media has started to refrain from using the word genocide." This is a time when more and more columnists, writers and academics use the word Genocide freely in newspapers, magazines, and conferences. Since the 90th Anniversary of the Genocide, the Istanbul branch of the Human Rights Association (HRA) commemorates 24th April every year, without avoiding the use of the word Genocide. Just this year, on April 24, HRA organized a panel discussion at the Bilgi University conference hall with Ara Sarafian, the editor of the uncensored edition of the Blue Book, as one of the participants to explain why the massacres of 1915 is a Genocide. And now, regardless of its initiators' intentions, the campaign is exposed to manipulations by some who are using it as a means to render the use of the term Genocide illegitimate in the eyes of the Turkish public. This is why I refuse to put my name in the list of signatories.

Yet, I know that many of my friends who feel exactly the same way signed the statement. I understand and respect them, because I can see why they did so. Some of my friends think that apology is the responsibility the state only and there is no reason for individuals who have nothing in common with the perpetrators to apologize. I beg to differ. Yes, I do believe that the obligation to apologize for past crimes lies first and foremost on the shoulders of states. Yet, I also believe that an apology is an individual, not just a formal and official, gesture. So, although I didn't sign that particular apology statement, I do apologize to the Armenians and Assyrians here and everywhere across the world because I am a member of an ethnic and religious group in whose name the Genocide was committed to Armenians and other native Christian communities of the Ottoman Empire. I also apologize because since my birth, I enjoyed, voluntarily or involuntarily, the advantages of being an ethnic Turk and a Sunni Muslim. This was true even during the years when I no longer felt myself a Turk and a Muslim and was against any national or religious identity, because, to give only one example, I was never made to suffer to say my name in public and I never faced the outright question "where are you from?" I have never been in a situation where I was taught in the

classroom how my great grandparents massacred Turks and recite an oath every morning by saying I'm ready to sacrifice myself for the existence of a nationality which I'm not a member of. I also apologize because none of us, Muslims in Turkey, can be positively sure that we haven't inherited any benefit one way or another from the enormous wealth of Armenian, Syriac and Greek victims that was transferred to the Muslim population of Turkey. I do apologize particularly because of my communist past. I considered myself part of a community that boasted to be the most progressive segment of the Turkish society. Yet, I didn't have the slightest idea of the fact that I was a member of a nation in whose name a Genocide was committed. I was one of those who kept preaching people about the "lies" told by the bourgeoisie, the ruling classes, claiming with utmost self-confidence that we were the ones to tell them the "truth," but who were completely ignorant of the most horrible truth, although there were enough indications that could have led us to question the official history.