

The Armenian Genocide as Jihad

by Richard L. Rubenstein (January 2015)

There is a 1919 silent film about the Armenian genocide, "Ravished Armenia," originally produced in Hollywood using Turkish documentary footage. It was based on a book by a survivor, Aurora Mardiganian, who also starred in the production. The film originally consisted of nine reels, most of which have been lost. Recently, a twenty-minute clip was found that contains brief scenes of many of the incidents that took place during the genocide.¹

Although low-definition, there is one terrible scene toward the end of the clip that is especially difficult to watch. Seldom, if ever, have I viewed a film scene that matches this one in sadistic obscenity. It is a crucifixion scene, but unlike Christian images of Christ on the cross that express symbolically the triumph of eternal life over evanescent human pain, this film's crucifixion scene carried a very different symbolic meaning. There are eight crosses in a row to which are nailed eight naked, young Armenian women. After the film offers a panoramic view of all of the crosses and their victims, it focuses on a single sufferer. Nailed to the cross, she is helplessly alive. One could tell by her eyes and facial movements that her cognitive functions were unimpaired as she *awaited the painful doom of her crucifixion*.

In this writer's opinion, that scene symbolically expressed much that the Turks wanted to convey about their behavior towards both the Armenians and their religion. In 1915, there were no pocket-sized cell phones with high-definition video capabilities. Motion picture cameras were heavy instruments and the terrible scenes of the deportations, confiscations, sadistic brutality, rapine, outright murder of helpless Armenians, and the crucifixion of the Armenian maidens could not have been filmed without the involvement and consent of Turkish authorities.

The perpetrators took the most sacred symbol of Christendom and turned it into a blasphemous obscenity, symbolically proclaiming absolute Muslim dominance. Nevertheless, something else was involved: women are the child bearers. Their wombs carry the next generation. No words were necessary. The message was clear: "We express our utter contempt for you and your religion. We intend to destroy your future. You have no human rights. We can do with you whatever we wish."

Nevertheless, shortly after the film was released, Turks apparently had second thoughts about what could be made available publically. Since then, for almost a century, Turkish governments have vehemently rejected the charge that Turks committed *genocide* against the Armenians. The most Turks have been willing to acknowledge is that *both* the Turks and Armenians inflicted wartime harm on each other, thereby arguing for moral equivalence between Turkish genocidal violence and rare instances of Armenian defensive action. Admitting that there were massacres, Turkish authorities have insisted that the number of Armenians killed has nevertheless been greatly exaggerated.² Moreover, in spite of the publication of a host of well-documented eye-witness reports and testimonies, Turkish governments have used their diplomatic influence to prevent governments, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Israel and others, from taking any action that would validate the Armenian claim that a nearly successful attempt to exterminate the Armenians of the Ottoman empire took place during the first World War.³

Admittedly, the subject is complex, but I concur with the overwhelming weight of scholarly opinion that affirms that genocide did take place. Yet while concurring with the judgment of groups such as the International Association of Genocide Scholars, my interest lies elsewhere: *In view of the fact that post-war German governments have acknowledged the role of National Socialist Germany in planning and implementing the extermination of Europe's Jews, why have successive Turkish governments refuse to tread a similar path with regard to the Armenian victims?*

Briefly stated, while steadfastly denying that genocide took place, Turkish governments have also implied that, no matter how terrible Turkish behavior may have been, no crime was committed and the actions taken against the Armenians were fully justified. This is not the view that the Turkish government has publicly expressed. Nevertheless, no other view appears able to explain the consistent behavior of the Turkish governments for almost a century.

In order to understand why, we must turn to the realm of religion in addition to politics and military affairs. This suggestion is in accord with the first words in Vahakn N. Dadrian's magisterial study of the Armenian genocides. Dadrian begins: "As a first step toward a full analysis of the nationality conflicts [in the Ottoman Empire], it is necessary to examine Islam as a major determinant in the genesis and escalation of these conflicts."⁴

As is well known, the Ottoman Empire was governed as a theocratic state at the apex of which stood the Sultan, both the supreme head of state and, for Sunni Muslims, the Caliph and, as such, the successor to the Prophet and supreme protector of Islam.

Moreover, Islam was an indispensable part of Turkish personal and national identity, even for

those members of the Turkish elite who were unaware of the extent to which they were influenced by their own religious inheritance. According to Turkish historian, Taner Akcam, "...the Turks, as a ruling stratum (even though they themselves were not conscious of their Turkishness), and under the influence of Islamic thought, identified themselves with Islam and felt themselves superior to the empire's other religious groups. The idea of the "ruling nation" (*Millet-I Hakime*) dominated the thinking of the Ottoman-Turkish ruling elite."⁵

According to Dadrian, the Young Turks or Ittihad, the Committee of Union and Progress, that gained power in 1908 and consolidated that power in 1913, were not "followers of the tenets of Islam." Dadrian adds, "While the Ittihad continued to run the State largely as a theocracy, its leaders were personally atheists and agnostics."⁶

Nevertheless, although the ruling elite had a very elevated opinion of themselves and their empire in comparison with neighbors whom they had once dominated, the actual situation of the Empire throughout the nineteenth century was one of decline and defeat at the hands of European Christian powers and their own Christian subject peoples. One can argue that the process of decline began with the Ottoman defeat at Vienna in 1683. It accelerated in the nineteenth century when Greece (1820), Serbia (1867), and Romania (1878) gained their independence. In addition, Turkey lost Libya to Italy in the Italo-Turkish War of 1911-12 and was defeated in the Albanian Revolt of 1912. The European borders of the Ottoman Empire shrank and those of their formerly Christian subjects expanded. There was a painful dissonance between the Young Turk image of themselves as leaders of the "ruling nation" and what was happening to their nation.

Another series of humiliations came from the Capitulations, a series of treaties or contracts between European powers, especially France, and the Ottoman Empire in which the Empire limited its jurisdiction over those Christian domiciled in the Empire who were the subjects of Christian rulers. In general, traders and later other foreigners were exempt from local prosecution, taxation, conscription, and the searching of their homes. Initially, such treaties were not seen as humiliations although they did constitute a limitation on Ottoman sovereignty but by the beginning of the twentieth century that they were seen as such. After World War I, they were finally abolished.

According to Taner Akcam, an important Turkish scholar who teaches at Clark University, the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a new problem for the Ottoman Empire: There was a very large in-migration of Muslim refugees from territories recently lost by the Ottoman

state. There were also expulsions and the Muslim immigrants had nowhere else to go. While the Ottoman state was shrinking, the number of Muslim immigrants had become a serious demographic problem. The problem peaked in the 1912-13 Balkan wars, not long before the genocide was initiated in 1915.

Akcam adds that until then, the Ottoman government solved its immigration problem on an ad hoc basis, but, in keeping with the modernizing and rationalizing bias of the Committee of Union and Progress, they decided to solve the problem systematically as part of a plan for the "homogenization" of Anatolia.⁷ In effect, plans for homogenization meant that Christians would either be expelled in a population exchange program, such as took place between Turkey and Greece, largely after the war, or the unwanted population would be exterminated, as happened with the Armenians.

Unlike most Armenian scholars, Akcam had access to Turkish archives and found that before World War I, the Committee of Union and Progress had already formulated a detailed, rational plan "to free [themselves] of non-Turkish elements" in the Aegean region. When the war came, they were fully prepared to implement their project of "ethno-religious homogenization" of Anatolia.

At this point, I would suggest a word of caution. Ronald Grigor Suny and other scholars have argued that the predominant motive for the murderous homogenization project was nationalism and there is no doubt that radical nationalism played a part. Nevertheless, I would argue that the most important motivation for the monumental "ethnic cleansing" projects was religious and specifically a consequence of the unchanging nature of certain aspects of Islam.

Although the official religion of the Ottoman Empire was Islam, over the centuries the empire had conquered a number of non-Muslim nations. This resulted in a double problem: The empire was thinly spread and many of the subjugated nations had skills that the conquering Muslims needed but did not possess. The problem was solved by a system of structural inequality that has persisted wherever Islam has been dominant.

According to Dadrian, the fundamental common law principle governing the relations between Muslim and non-Muslim subjects was a quasi-legal contract, the *Akdi Zimmet* (contract with the ruling nationality), in which the sovereign guaranteed non-Muslim subjects the safety of "their persons, their civil and religious liberties, and, conditionally, their property in exchange for the payment of poll and land taxes, and acquiescence to a set of social and legal disabilities"⁸

In reality, the *Akdi Zimmet* was in spirit and substance the *dhimma*, the Muslim pact of submission that terminated the state of war with Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians and stipulated the conditions under which the subjugated "peoples of the book" were permitted domicile in Islamic lands.⁹ *Strictly speaking, Islamic tradition envisages no such thing as enduring peace between faithful Muslims and infidels.* There can be a truce when combat appears unlikely to succeed or when it serves Muslim convenience. There could also be conditional toleration in a multi-national, multi-religious empire based on an hierarchical gradation of status, such as the Ottoman in which the distinctions of rulers and ruled, Muslims and non-Muslim, were strictly maintained.¹⁰ This arrangement worked well until the nineteenth century when intervention by European powers, England, France, and Russia, that had provided a system of extraterritorial rights for their citizens living and trading in the Ottoman Empire, became a source of Turkish resentment.

There had also been an hierarchical gradation of status in Christian Europe, but under the influence of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, there was a definite move toward equality of legal, if not social, status in the countries of western Europe and the United State in which law was not thought of as unchanging in character or divine in origin. This does not mean that there were no forces for change in Islamic law. There were, but the agency of change was interpretation by recognized scholarly authorities who maintained the fiction of an unchanging law while change was effected through casuistry and interpretation. There was, incidentally, a comparable phenomenon in traditional rabbinic law.

There was, however, one area in which interpretation could change nothing, the legally enforced social, religious, and political inferiority of non-Muslims to Muslims. Nor did this change when the modernizing Young Turks, the Committee of Union and Progress, took power in 1908. Although some Christians were under the mistaken impression that the Young Turks favored an Ottoman polity based upon equality of status, they were quickly disabused of the notion. The Young Turks were as committed, as were their predecessors, to the idea of Muslims as the ruling nation and non-Muslim as, at best, tolerated infidels. In reality, the defeats suffered by the Ottoman Empire made them, if anything, more committed to the idea, so much so that they were willing to commit mass murder for it.

The idea of Muslims as the ruling nation is best understood by two related concepts, dhimmitude and dhimmi. According to Bat Ye'or, who has done much to acquaint western readers with the terms:

Dhimmitude designates the civilizations of peoples conquered by jihad over the past

thirteen centuries and subjected to shari'a law. A "dhimmi" is a non-Muslim belonging to the civilization of dhimmitude. Having surrendered to the armies of jihad, the dhimmi loses his territorial rights and his sovereignty, but in exchange he is protected by a contract (dhimma) against jihad—the obligatory and irrevocable war against the infidels. This protection provides some relative security, conditioned upon a series of demeaning restrictions and discrimination.¹¹

The Christians of the Ottoman Empire were all descendants of conquered peoples and were, as such, dhimmis. It made no difference that, in many cases, their ancestors had settled the land long before Muslim conquest. The Muslims were the conquerors and the Christians were the conquered peoples and were treated as such.

There was only one way a conquered person or community could achieve, at least theoretically, full equality with his or her overlords, conversion to Islam which made a person a member of the Muslim *umma* or nation. Not only did equal status depend on religion, so too did subordinate status. Put differently, personal and political status were religiously legitimated.

As Peter Balakian and other scholars have shown, the Christian population of the Ottoman Empire was both wealthier and better educated than the Muslim population. This is not an uncommon phenomenon where there is a system of structured inequality. Apart from land-owning and control of the peasantry, the personal characteristics valued by a dominant group are those that facilitate dominance, such as bureaucratic skills and military leadership. Money making skills that require advanced schooling, such as large-scale trading, finance, and commerce are looked down upon.

In the Ottoman Empire, Christians took advantage of the schools and colleges, largely established by American Protestant missionaries, or they sought training at European universities. As a result, they acquired the skills necessary for wealth, but they also became the objects of envy, resentment, and hostility.

During the nineteenth-century, Armenians tended to rise above the Turks economically. The more affluent sent their sons abroad to receive their education in a rapidly modernizing Europe. As Christians, they had links to Europe that were not available to the Muslim majority. Diaspora Armenians sent home remittances and brought back to their families in the empire new machines and technology. When the sale of Muslim lands to non-Muslims became permitted by the reforms of 1856, Armenians had the resources to buy up large landholdings, especially after 1870.¹² This resulted in a reversal of status in a world newly oriented toward industry and commerce.

Resentment was bitter and fed upon itself, so that Sultan Abdul Hamid II's efforts to undo the emancipatory reforms received widespread Muslim support.

A related source of Turkish resentment stemmed from the fact that the Armenians were a "market dominant minority."¹³ As noted above, discriminated minorities, barred from service in the military or the state bureaucracy and subject to other forms of social and vocational discrimination, tend to rely on education and training for their economic survival and well-being to a much greater extent than do indigenous majorities. Such minorities are also likely to be concentrated in urban centers and to specialize in urban trades and crafts, finance, and the professions. Their capital consists in what is in their heads and is easily transportable. Often subject to expulsion, they formed diaspora networks that were intrinsically advantageous in both finance and commerce. This had been the case with the European Jews before World War II, the Chinese in Southeast Asia, the Lebanese in West Africa, and the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, reformist sultans, such as [Mahmud II](#) (1789-1839) and Abdülmeçid (1823-1861), as well as prominent European-educated Turkish bureaucrats, recognized that traditional religious and military institutions could no longer meet the needs of the modern empire. Among the changes introduced were universal [conscription](#), and educational and institutional reforms. The measures were known as the Tanzimat reforms the objective of which was the creation of a common Ottoman identity in the empire for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The policy was initiated with the Imperial Rescript of the Rose Chamber of 1839 that stipulated that the different peoples within the empire were declared equal before the law. The reforms guaranteed the life, honor, and property of all Ottoman subjects, regardless of race or religion. In 1856, a second, expanded edict of reform asserted the equality of all Ottoman subjects, Muslim and non-Muslim.¹⁴

The era of reform came to an end shortly after the accession of Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1842-1918). The response, especially from the Armenians, was not long in coming. In the 1880s, Armenian exiles in Europe, influenced by western ideas about national self-determination and the "people" as the source of political legitimacy, began to campaign for national autonomy. The Armenians did not initially seek full political independence, but nationalism provided a powerful legitimation for separation from the multinational Ottoman Empire. As such, it was profoundly subversive of the imperial order. Armenian rebels in the Caucasus organized raids into Ottoman territory. While the vast majority of Armenians sought amelioration of their situation within the empire, by 1890, an Armenian Revolutionary Federation was established in Tiflis (Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia) that demanded Armenian

freedom "with gun in hand."¹⁵ In 1891, the Sultan responded by raising a force of Kurdish Muslim irregulars and sanctioning their predatory attacks on Armenians.¹⁶ Within a year, the Kurds had formed cavalry units totaling 15,000 men. Assured of legal immunity, the Kurds attacked and spread terror among Armenians in the capital and the hinterland. In 1893 Armenian revolutionaries posted placards in many towns and cities calling on Muslims to rise up against the Sultan's oppression. Since, as noted, the Sultan was also the Caliph, combining the traditional functions of political and religious leadership, the Armenian challenge was seen by traditionalists as a radical breach of the *dhimma*.

Actual massacres first broke out in the summer of 1894 in Sasun in southern Armenia. Turkish authorities used Armenian resistance to a system of double taxation and officially sanctioned Kurdish violence and sexual abuse of Armenian women as a pretext for indiscriminate rape and slaughter.¹⁷ News of the outrages quickly spread to Europe and Britain, France and Russia demanded a commission of inquiry. These same powers also sought to persuade the Ottoman government to adopt reforms in those provinces where most of the Armenians were domiciled. The Sultan made an empty show of accepting some reforms, although he had no intention of implementing them. In September, 1895, Armenians demonstrated in Constantinople in order to pressure the Sultan and the European powers to implement the reforms. The police and radical Muslim elements in the capital city responded with ten days of massacre and terror. About the same time, an unprovoked, premeditated massacre began in the city of Trebizond on the Black Sea (Adalian). The massacres then spread through almost every town with a significant number of Armenian inhabitants. There was nothing spontaneous about the massacres. They were in fact military operations that began and ended daily with the call of a bugle.¹⁸

The worst massacre occurred in the city of Urfa, known to the ancient world as Edessa, where Armenians constituted about a third of the population. In December 1895, after a two-month siege of the Armenian quarter, Armenian leaders gathered in their cathedral and requested official Turkish protection. The Turkish commander agreed but then surrounded the Cathedral of Urfa, after which Turkish troops and the mob rampaged through the Armenian quarter burning, looting, and killing all adult males. 2,500 Armenians were burned alive in the cathedral. Dadrian comments that *wherever possible the killing was done in such a way as to emphasize the religious nature of the deed*.¹⁹ Lord Kinross describes the manner in which the slaughter was assimilated to a sacrificial ritual: "When a large group of young Armenians were brought before a sheikh, he had them thrown down on their backs and held by their hands and feet. Then, in the words of an observer, he recited verses of the Koran and *"cut their throats after the Mecca rite of sacrificing sheep"*

The mosques were places of incitement; the Christian churches served as slaughterhouses. Murderous mobs were urged on by their imams. The worst butchery often followed Friday services. Dadrian also comments on the importance of local religious authorities in the implementation of the massacres. The sultan in distant Constantinople could issue orders for the massacres, often framed in covert language, but the interpretation, planning, and implementation of such orders required the leadership of local authority figures. *Because of the empire's theocratic nature, local religious leaders used their authority to assure the mob that the massacres were in accordance with the Seriat (shari'a).*²⁰ With very few exceptions, the *muftis* [jurisconsults who dispensed formal legal opinions], *kadis* [magistrates and guardians of law and order], *ulemas* [Muslim theologians] and *mullahs* played a crucial role in conferring religious legitimacy.

The reactions of both the Muslim and non-Muslim populations were recorded by Cevet Paşa, an astute observer and a high Ottoman official:

In accordance with this *ferman* [edict] Muslim and non-Muslim subjects were to be made equal in all rights. This had a very adverse effect on the Muslims. Previously, one of the four points adopted as the basis for peace agreements had been that certain privileges were accorded to Christians on condition that these did not infringe on the sovereign authority of the government. Now the question of (specific) privileges lost its significance; in the whole range of government, the non-Muslims were forthwith to be deemed the equals of the Muslims. Many Muslims began to grumble: 'Today we have lost our sacred national rights, won by the blood of our fathers and forefathers. At a time when the Islamic *millet* was the ruling *millet*, it was deprived of this sacred right. This is a day of weeping and mourning for the people of Islam.'

As for the non-Muslims, this day, when they left the status of *raya* [*dhimmi*] and gained equality with the ruling *millet*, was a day of rejoicing. But the patriarchs and other spiritual chiefs were displeased, because their appointments were incorporated in the *ferman*. Another point was that whereas in former times, in the Ottoman state, the communities were ranked, with the Muslims first, then the Greeks, then the Armenians, then the Jews, now all of them were put on the same level. Some Greeks objected to this, saying: 'The government has put us together with the Jews. We were content with the supremacy of Islam.'

As a result of all this, just as the weather was overcast when the *ferman* was read in the audience chamber, so the faces of most of those present were grim. Only on the faces of a few of our Frenchified gentry dressed in the garb of Islam could expressions of joy

be seen. Some notorious characters of this type were seen and heard to say: 'If the non-Muslims are spread among the Muslims, neighborhoods will become mixed, the price of our properties will rise, and civilized amenities will expand.' On this account they expressed satisfaction.²¹

Even before Abdul Hamid II abolished the reforms, their likely negative consequences of were already understood in 1856 by Grand Vizier, Mustafa Re?id Pasha (1800-1858), a brilliant diplomat. In a memorandum addressed to the sultan in the wake of the reforms of that year, Re?id foresaw the possibility of a "great slaughter" as a result of the efforts to establish the civic equality of all Ottoman subjects through legal enactment.²²

Re?id's views were prescient. Muslim traditionalists regarded the emancipation of Jews and Christians as profoundly offensive. Before emancipation, payment of the *jizya*, the poll tax imposed upon all male *dhimmis*, symbolized their subjection, inferior status, and suspension of *jihad*. By voiding *dhimmi* disabilities, traditionalists believed the *dhimma* had been rendered null and void. In their eyes, *dhimmi* emancipation did not mean an end to civic disabilities but the *restoration of the state of war against the dhimmis*. Under the circumstances, the traditionalists believed that, at least in theory, the *umma*, the Muslim community, could commit any outrage against them.²³ Moreover, these actions were regarded "not only as justified but also as mandatory and even as praiseworthy"²⁴

Peter Balakian has described one of the most agonizing disabilities imposed upon the Armenians because of their *dhimmi* status:

Another burden solely for the Armenians was the *kishlak*, or winter-quartering obligation, which enabled Kurds and Turks to quarter themselves, their families, and their cattle in Armenian homes during the long winter months. The fact that the Kurdish way of life was nomadic and rough and the Armenian dwellings did not allow for much privacy made the intrusion unbearable, and knowing that the unarmed Armenians had neither physical nor legal recourse, a well-armed Kurd or Turk could not only steal his host's possessions but could rape or kidnap the women and girls of the household with impunity."²⁵

The massacres of 1894-1896 constituted an unprecedented level of violence on the part of the Ottoman Empire against one of its subject peoples. In spite of pressure from the Great Powers, Abdul Hamid II was clearly determined to frustrate Armenian hopes of reform. He also sought to crush any Armenian attempt to organize politically. Estimates of the number of dead

range from 100,000 to 300,000. Tens of thousands emigrated; thousands were forcibly converted to Islam. Moreover, the Sultan understood that he could deal with his subjects with utter impunity because the Great Powers were more interested in good relations with his empire than the fate of a minority subject-people. From the sultan's point of view, the Armenians got what they deserved. *By seeking to overcome their religiously-defined subordinate status and seeking the help of foreign rulers, they had broken their contract of submission and had placed themselves in a state of war with his realm in which no violence, expropriation, or indignity was out of bounds as we see in the crucifixion of the eight Armenian maidens.*

Abdul Hamid's massacres can be characterized as pre-genocidal. The slaughter had irretrievably marginalized and dehumanized the Armenians. The massacres thus prepared the way for the full-scale genocide and ethnic homogenization perpetrated by the modernizing twentieth-century regime of the Committee of Union and Progress, the Young Turks.

Nevertheless, the political agenda of the Young Turks was different from the sultan's. They were a Turkish reform party that responded to the weakness of the Ottoman Empire as manifested in Austria-Hungary's annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908, Italy's seizure of Libya and the island of Rhodes in 1912, the independence of Albania in 1912, and the Ottoman defeat in the First Balkan War of 1912-1913 that led to the loss of much of the Ottoman territory in Europe. Moreover, as noted, in the empire itself, Muslims had been losing ground to *dhimmi* minorities, the Greeks, Jews, and Armenians, who dominated the world of commerce and the professions. The Young Turks were modernizing, rationalizing "progressives" who understood, as did the Japanese elites at the time of the Meiji Reformation of 1866-1869, that, absent modernization, the independence and territorial integrity of their respective empires would be at risk.

In 1908, the Young Turks effectively overthrew Abdul Hamid II's traditionalist regime. In their initial enthusiasm, many Armenians made an understandable but deadly miscalculation. They assumed that the overthrow of an inefficient and corrupt traditional regime by one that was less corrupt and more rational augured well for their own community. The Young Turks had given public assurances of equal treatment of the empire's non-Muslim minorities, but the logic of their modernizing revolution made ethnic homogenization rather than diversity the almost inevitable political outcome.

The first generation of Turkish revolutionaries were divided on the issue of working with the Armenians, as was evident at the First Congress of the Ottoman Opposition that met in Paris in February, 1902. Some of the more liberal Young Turks thought that an alliance with the Armenians would get a favorable response from the Europeans. Armenian activists declared that

cooperation with the Turkish revolutionaries was conditional on the implementation of reforms in the six Anatolian *vilayets* (provinces) with significant Armenian populations to be guaranteed by the European powers. The conditions were acceptable to the majority attending the Congress but were vehemently rejected by the nationalist minority. The latter regarded European support as wholly at odds with their fundamental objective, the creation of a strong, independent Ottoman realm in which the traditional status hierarchy would remain more or less intact. The views of the minority ultimately carried greater weight as they represented the dominant tendency among most Young Turk organizations and newspapers.²⁶

According to Ronald Grigor Suny and other scholars, in the first decade of the twentieth century there was a shift by the Young Turks from what he characterizes as an "Ottomanist orientation" that emphasized the equality of the *millet*s in a multinational society to a more Turkish nationalist position that stressed the predominance of the ethnic Turks over the subordinate communities that were regarded as "the protected flock of the Sultan," Armenian, Catholic, Jewish, and Orthodox.²⁷ Until World War I, loyalty to the empire remained part of Young Turk rhetoric, but it was increasingly supplanted by nationalist ideology. The shift placed the Armenian political leaders in a difficult position. Their community was to be found on both sides of the Ottoman-Russian border. In addition, the Armenians were split into two factions, largely along socioeconomic lines. The Dashnak, members of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (*Hai Heghapokhakan Dashnaksutiun*), represented the Armenian petty bourgeoisie of Anatolia; the patriarchate represented the wealthy commercial class of the capital and other larger cities.²⁸ The Dashnak ultimately sought autonomy if not complete Armenian independence. The patriarchate and its allies sought a restoration of their traditional privileges as *dhimmi*s in the *millet* system that was threatened by the centralizing tendencies of government.

When the war began, the Dashnak urged Armenians to volunteer in the Ottoman army. In Tsarist Russia, the Dashnak urged Armenians to enlist in the Tsarist army. As a result, both the Tsarist and the Ottoman governments suspected the Armenians of disloyalty. The situation was aggravated by the dangers confronting the Ottoman Empire in 1914 and 1915. In November, 1914, over the objections of field commanders, Turkish forces led by Enver Pasha, Minister of War and one of the ruling Young Turk triumvirate, attempted to regain land in the Caucasus lost to the Russians in 1878. Enver's effort ended catastrophically at Sarikamis, a Turkish town in the Caucasus. In the west, Djemal Pasha led an attack in February 1915 on the Suez Canal that also ended in defeat. In March 1915, in response to a Russian request for aid, Allied naval forces under Admiral Sir John de Robeck, Commander of the Aegean Squadron, made preparations to force a passage through the Dardanelles Strait. The evacuation of

Constantinople began and the state archives and the empire's gold reserves were sent away. Most observers anticipated the empire's collapse. However, on March 18, 1915, as a result of an unsuspected Turkish minefield in the Strait, five Allied warships were destroyed. The Allied attempt to force the Strait ended in disaster.²⁹

When the Young Turks contemplated evacuating from Constantinople to the Anatolian heartland, they could not ignore the issue of security. Anatolia's population was mixed. In addition to Turks, it was inhabited by Greeks, Armenians and Kurds whose loyalty was suspect in Turkish eyes. Some Greek civilians were deported from the coastal areas, but those deportations were not genocidal in intent. In the first months of 1915, the Young Turks responded to the defeat at Sarikamis by blaming the Armenians whom they accused of sympathizing with the Russians.³⁰ The Ottoman authorities disarmed and demobilized Armenian soldiers who were then forced into labor brigades and compelled to dig their own graves before being shot.³¹

Rumors of the slaughter spread in the Armenian villages.³² On April 20, 1915, the Armenians of Van rose up in self-defense when Djevdet Bey, the recently appointed governor of Van and Enver Pasha's brother-in-law, demanded that the Armenian leadership hand over four thousand men for the Ottoman army's labor battalions. With no illusions concerning the fate of the men if they complied, the leadership refused, an action depicted by the Turks as a revolutionary uprising.³³ The Armenians held out in Van until May 14, 1915, when the city was captured by the Russians with the aid of some Armenian guerrillas who proclaimed Van the capital of an independent Armenian republic. When the Turks recaptured the city in July, they were infuriated by what they regarded as Armenian treason and launched a massacre, butchering the men, and robbing, raping and leaving the women to die. Dr. Clarence B. Ussher, an American medical missionary in Van, reported that 55,000 Armenians were killed there in May.³⁴ On April 24, 1915 the Ministry of the Interior ordered the arrest of Armenian parliamentary deputies, former ministers, and some intellectuals. Thousands were arrested, including 2,345 in the capital, most of whom were subsequently executed.³⁵

On May 27, 1915, a new emergency law was promulgated, the Temporary Law of Deportation. The law authorized military leaders to order the deportation of population groups on suspicion of espionage, treason, and military necessity. With this sweeping authorization and without explicitly naming the Armenians, the Turkish government arrogated to itself the genocidal deportation of its Armenian population. Shortly thereafter, Djevdet Bey, Van's governor, gave an order to "exterminate all Armenian males of 12 years and older" in that border region.³⁶ Actual genocide had begun in April, 1915, with the rounding up and deportation of Armenian

men in one population center after another. The men were usually imprisoned for several days, after which they were marched out of town and massacred. Later women, children and older men were also deported. The women were often raped and mutilated before being killed. Thousands of the female deportees were given the choice of conversion to Islam or death. Having lost their men and completely at the mercy of hostile Turks and Kurds, many of the women converted. We return to that subject below.

In June, 1915, the government began to use the railroads to expedite deportation and extermination. Freight cars were employed to transport thousands to remote areas where they were left to starve to death while being assaulted by the ravages of nature and human malice. Many were murdered outright. The Armenian deportees were among the first men and women in the twentieth century to learn that *human rights are inseparable from political status*. Having been deprived by the Ottoman government of all political status, save that of outlaw, there was no abuse that could not with impunity be inflicted upon them.

The extermination project was thoroughly modern in spirit and implementation from its initial planning stages to its execution.³⁷ Mass extermination was advocated in the planning sessions as the appropriate "scientific" response to the universal struggle of the races for survival.³⁸ Like other modernizing elites of the period, the largely European-trained Young Turks interpreted the relations between races and nations in Social Darwinist terms. Above all, the Young Turks had a reliable, centralized bureaucratic network. Taaalat Bey, one of the ruling triumvirs and Minister of the Interior, did not entrust the assignment to old-fashioned provincial bureaucrats but sent Young Turk bureaucrats to act as his personal representatives and, when necessary, to punish governors and local governors who, out of compassion or greed, failed to carry out orders. There was a special organization with responsibility for organizing the massacres. At the local level, much of the actual killing was carried out by death squads who were given the name of "Butcher Battalions."³⁹

Taaalat Bey spelled out the objectives of his government in a telegram to the Police Office in Aleppo, Syria, dated September 15, 1915:

It has been reported that by order of the Committee [of Union and Progress] the Government has *determined completely to exterminate the Armenians living in Turkey*. Those who refuse to obey this order cannot be regarded as friends of the Government. Regardless of the women, children or invalids, and however deplorable the methods of destruction may seem, an end is to be put to their existence [i.e., the Armenians] without paying any heed to feeling or conscience." (emphasis added).

Taalat,

Minister of the Interior⁴⁰

The Young Turks characterized their aggression as “deportations,” and insisted that they were acting in the interests of national security. However, it was quickly apparent that the number of victims far exceeded the nineteenth-century massacres. In 1915 deportation had acquired a new and sinister meaning. It had become an instrument of extermination in which no fewer than one million Armenians perished.⁴¹

Many volumes have been written about the Armenian genocide. One of the earliest was also one of the most comprehensive, the report assembled by Viscount James Bryce in 1916 in partnership with Historian Arnold Toynbee and presented to Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary. The authors concluded their report with an observation concerning the slaughter: “It was a deliberate, systematic attempt to eradicate the Armenian population throughout the Ottoman Empire and it has certainly met with a very large measure of success.”⁴²

To this day, Turkish authorities have denied that genocide ever took place, and insist that their actions were necessary defensive measures against a disloyal and rebellious minority.⁴³ That claim has been refuted by the vast majority of responsible scholars. Nevertheless, the Turkish government has used every threat in its diplomatic arsenal to prevent friendly governments from officially taking issue with its denial of genocide.

As noted above, there is little reason to doubt that Abdul Hamid’s massacres were in large measure religiously motivated. The sultan-caliph was responsible for mass murder on an unprecedented scale but extermination of the entire community was beyond his capacities. Not so, the Young Turks. Within months after Turkey’s entrance into the Great War, the decision to exterminate the Armenians had been taken. When the deed was done, the justifications the Young Turks offered were largely political and economic.

When I first wrote about the Armenian genocide of 1915, I stressed the modernity of the enterprise and its economic, political and military motives.⁴⁴ I did not consider the possibility that the perpetrators’ motives might have included a very important religious component. Today, I would argue that religion was an indispensable component in the

motivation for genocide. It was certainly an indispensable element in defining the otherness of non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire. I would further argue that the crimes perpetrated against the Armenians were regarded by the Turks as legitimate defensive methods of dealing with *dhimmi*s who had violated the conditions of the *dhimma*, and, hence, were outlaws for whom everything, including life, property, freedom, and family, was forfeit. I would also argue that the persistent Turkish genocide denial – so different from the German way of dealing with their genocide – has been due, at least in part, to the Turkish belief that they did no wrong in exterminating the Armenians, a belief that rests ultimately on the traditions of *jihad* and the *dhimma*.

In the massacres of 1894-1896, Turkish authorities were quite open about religious legitimations. In 1914, religion was once again an important component in the conduct of Turkish authorities, this time in the way the war was initiated and its purposes defined. On November 2, 1914, the Ottoman Empire declared war on the Entente powers, Britain, France, Russia, and their allies. On November 13, the Ottoman Sultan, in his capacity, as Caliph, issued an appeal for *jihad*. The next day Mustafa Hayri Bey, the Sheikh-ul-Islam, and as such the chief Sunni religious authority in the Ottoman world, issued a formal (and inflammatory) declaration of *jihad* “against infidels and enemies of Islam.” *Jihad* pamphlets in Arabic were also distributed in mosques throughout the Muslim world that offered a detailed plan of operations for the assassination and extermination of all “unbelievers” except those of German nationality, the empire’s wartime ally.⁴⁵ Killing squads and their leaders were “motivated by both the ideology of *jihad* and pan-Turkism influenced by European nationalism.”⁴⁶ While the practical influence of the *jihad* on the masses was limited, “it later facilitated the government’s program of genocide against the Armenians.”⁴⁷ It is also worth noting that although the Sheikh-ul-Islam was customarily appointed by the Sultan, Hayri Bey was appointed by the Committee of Union and Progress, the Young Turks who were to instigate the genocide.

According to historian Ara Sarafian, in addition to the killings and general massacres, a large number of Armenians were “‘abducted,’ ‘carried off,’ or ‘converted to Islam’”⁴⁸ Sarafian argues that “the fate of this latter class of Armenians was part of the same genocidal calculus as those who were murdered.” It is estimated that in 1915-1916 between 100,000 and 200,000 Armenians, most of whom were women and children, escaped death by converting to Islam. The absorption of these converts into the Muslim community had the same objective as outright genocide, the elimination of the Christian Armenian community as a demographic presence in the Ottoman Empire. In addition to killing a very large number of Armenians

through forced marches and starvation, the deportations served to weaken and terrify women and children who had lost their male protectors before or during the deportations. According to Sarafian, "...young women and children were rendered prime candidates for absorption into Muslim households after they were isolated from their families and terrorized during the forced marches and execution of their elders"⁴⁹

Sarafian contends, with considerable justice, that the authorities were implementing a "single policy of destruction" in both the outright murder of adult males and in the absorption of Armenian women and children into the Muslim community. The same Ottoman bureaucrats who controlled the deportations were also in charge of the conversion program. In the initial stages of the assault on the Armenians, there were "voluntary" conversions. Some individuals were selected by individual Muslims for absorption into their households. In addition, government agencies distributed Armenians to Muslim families. Children in government-sponsored orphanages were converted and directly absorbed into the Muslim community.

Events in Trebizond are illustrative of how the program functioned. Between July 1 and July 18, 1915, five deportation convoys left Trebizond. Oscar Heizer, the American Consul, reported that most of the deportees were killed by their guards shortly after leaving.⁵⁰ Approximately 3,000 children, girls up to 15 years old and boys no older than ten, were placed in a number of houses designated by the Turks as "orphanages." Another 300 were housed in the American missionary school which was turned into an orphanage. Both orphanages were subsequently closed down by an official sent from Constantinople to supervise the extermination of the Armenians. Some children were drowned by the Turks; others were distributed to Muslim households where, according to Heizer, they were assimilated as Muslims within weeks.⁵¹ Elsewhere, U.S. Consul Leslie Davis reported on the passage of thousands of deportees through Harpoot which was situated on a principal route to the deserts of Syria. Davis wrote that hardly any men had survived among the deportees. Subject to constant beatings, with little or no food or water, the victims were rapidly dying. The gendarmes guarding the Armenians refused to permit them to leave the convoy or to receive aid from American missionaries. They did, however, permit Turks to visit the convoys with doctors to select "the prettiest girls" for their own purposes. Davis further reported that the Turks were not only seeking to exterminate the Armenians; they were also seeking to absorb a large number as Muslims. Sarafian concludes that there was a mass transfer of Armenians into Muslim households in 1915. By destroying the Armenian social structure in the early stages of the genocide through the murder of young men, heads of families, and community leaders, the Turks were able to garner "the ideal candidates for absorption" into Muslim households and the

general Muslim population.⁵²

As cruel as this program was, it was fundamentally different from the Nazi Final Solution. Suny has observed that "To a considerable degree, religious differences were transmuted by both the Armenians and the Turks into racial and national differences, far more indelible and immutable than religion"⁵³ Nevertheless, Suny's qualifier, "To a considerable degree" is important. For the Nazis, the racial divide between the so-called Aryans and Non-Aryans was absolute and unbridgeable. In the National Socialist universe, there was no room for an absorption program for Non-Aryans, save for a miniscule number of "Honorary Aryans." Some Poles and others with the appropriate physical characteristics could be absorbed, but not the Jews. By contrast, even in genocide, religion made a difference in the Ottoman Empire. Conversion could and did save some Armenians even as it destroyed their community. Moreover, as noted, both the extermination and the conversion process were fully consistent with Islamic tradition in the eyes of the Turks.

Nor were the Armenians the only Christian minority eliminated by the Turks, albeit by somewhat gentler means. In January, 1923, after Greece's failed invasion of Turkey's Anatolian mainland and Turkey's repudiation of the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, at Turkey's insistence both countries agreed to an "exchange" of populations. Between 1923 and 1930, 1.25 million "Greeks" were "repatriated" from Turkey to Greece; a smaller number of "Turks" departed from Greece to Turkey. However, as Bernard Lewis points out, the exchanges did not imply acceptance of the European principle of nationality in which Greeks and Turks, "unwilling or unable to live as national minorities among aliens," elected to return to their homeland and live among their own people. In reality, the great majority of Anatolia's "Greeks" spoke little or no Greek. They spoke Turkish among themselves although they wrote in the Greek script. Similarly, many of the "Turks" in Greece and Crete spoke Greek among themselves and knew little or no Turkish. The expulsions were actually based on religion. Turkish-speaking Christians faithful to the Greek Orthodox Church were expelled to Greece, a "homeland" they had never known, while Greek-speaking Muslims were expelled to Turkey.⁵⁴ The Armenian genocide, the absorption-conversion program, and what was, in effect, the expulsion of Turkey's "Greeks" all shared a common objective, the elimination of a significant Christian demographic presence from Turkey. The methods varied, but all three can be seen as religiously-motivated state-sponsored programs of population elimination.

Finally, I take note of an authoritative report based entirely on Arab sources entitled "Contemporary Islamist Ideology Authorizing Genocidal Murder" by Yigal Carmon in which he demonstrates that today's radical Islamists regard genocide as a legitimate weapon against

those whom they regard as enemies of Islam.⁵⁵ Holding that Islam is now under attack, they see unremitting *jihad* as both defensive in character and *the single most important Muslim religious obligation*. It is obligatory for Muslims without restriction or limitation. No weapons or types of warfare are to be excluded. Without exception, all infidels are to be fought and, barring conversion, are to be exterminated. I must, however, stress that these are the views of the most radical elements within contemporary Islam. We do not know the extent to which the extremists can persuade or compel the Islamic mainstream to share their views.

[1]

http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/A_Letter_from_The_International_Association_of_Genocide_Scholars

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[2] See, "[Inflated Figures of Armenian Genocide & Credibility](#),"

[3] See the text of an 'open letter from the members of the International Association of Genocide Scholars to Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, dated June 7, 2005, calling on him " to acknowledge the responsibility of a previous [Turkish] government for the genocide of the Armenian people, as the German government and people have done in the case of the Holocaust." The text is available at: http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/A_Letter_from_The_International_Association_of_Genocide_Scholars

[4] Vahakn N. Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus* (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1995), p. 3.

[5] Taner Akcam, *The Genocide of the Armenians and the Silence of the Turks*, p. 49.

http://www.wbarrow.co.uk/rememberarmenia/pdfs_in_chapters/04_armenia2_turk_affirms.pdf .

[6] Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide*, 5.

[7] Akcam, *op. cit.*, Kindle location 1239.

[8] Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide*, 4.

[9] Bat Ye'or, *Islam and Dhimmitude: Where Civilizations Collide* (Madison, NJ, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002) 37-38.

[10] Suny, "Religion, Ethnicity," 30-31.

[11] Bat Ye'or, *Europe, Globalization, and the Coming of the Universal Caliphate* (Rowman & Littlefield, Kindle Edition), p.1.

[12] Suny, "Religion, Ethnicity," 39.

[13] For an exploration of the phenomenon of market-dominant minorities, see Amy Chua, *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability*. (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2003)

[14] On the *Tanzimat* Reforms, see Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide*, 25-27, 32-33.

[15] Lord Kinross (John Balfour, 3rd Baron Kinross), *The Ottoman Centuries: The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Empire*. (New York, NY: William Morrow, 1977), 556-557.

[16] Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide*, 45-47.

[17] On the origins of the Sasun massacres, see Balakian, *The Burning Tigris*, 54- 56 and Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide*, 114-116.

[18] Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries*, 559.

[19] Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide*, 147.

[20] Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide*, 149.

[21] Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The*

Functioning of a Plural Society (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1982), 30.

[22] J. C. Hurewitz, *Diplomacy in the Near and Middle East, A Documentary Record: 1535-1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), Vol. 1, 154;

[23] See "Infidel Status in the Ottoman Empire" in Balakian, *The Burning Tigris*, 40-43.

[24] Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians under Islam* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985), 101.

[25] Balakian, *The Burning Tigris*, 41-42.

[26] Suny, "Religion, Ethnicity," 46-47.

[27] Suny, "Religion, Ethnicity," 47.

[28] Braude and Lewis, *Christians and Jews*, 418.

[29] David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt, 1989), 152-153.

[30] Balakian, *The Burning Tigris*, 178.

[31] Balakian, *The Burning Tigris*, 178.

[32] Suny, "Religion, Ethnicity," 52.

[33] Balakian, *The Burning Tigris*, 179.

[34] Henry Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1919), 299. For an American eye-witness's account of the events in Van in 1915, see Grace Higley Knapp, "The American Mission in Van" in Viscount Bryce, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire 1915-1916: Documents Presented to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs By Viscount Bryce*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: G. Doniguian & Sons, 1972), 21-47.

[35] Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide*, 221.

[36] Mark Mazower, "The G Word," *London Review of Books*, 8 February 2001, Vol. 23, No.3, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v23/n03/mazo01_.html>.

[37] Dadrian, "The Secret Young-Turk Ittihadist Conference and the Decision for the World War I Genocide of the Armenians," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Fall 1993, 173-201 and Michael J. Arlen, *Passage to Ararat* (New York: Farrar Strauss and Giroux: 1975), 343-344.

[38] Taner Akçam, "The Genocide of the Armenians and the Silence of the Turks," <<http://www.omroep.nl/human/tv/muur/artikel2.htm>>.

[39] Bryce, *The Treatment of Armenians*, 84. This information was also presented by Professor R. Hrair Dekmejian of the University of Southern California at the Seminar in Commemoration of the 65th Anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, St. Vartan's Cathedral, New York, N. Y., 25 April 1980.

[40] The telegram is quoted in Manuel Sarkisianz, *A Modern History of Transcaucasian Armenia* (Privately printed by the author, Nagpur, India: Udyama Commercial Press, 1975 [Distributed by E. J. Brill, Leiden]), 196.

[41] According to Mazower, "Deportation – a traditional instrument of imperial rule had little to do with it: the old-fashioned version [of deportations], which valued subject populations for economic reasons, aimed to relocate rather than destroy them." Mazower, "The G Word," *London Review of Books*.

[42] Bryce, *The Treatment of Armenians*, 648.

[43] For an early example of the Turkish justification of the slaughter, see the interview granted by Halil Bey, The Turkish Foreign Minister, to the Associated Press representative at Vienna, 25 Oct. 1915. Halil attempted to throw the blame for the massacres of Armenian men, women, and children upon the Armenians themselves, asserting that they had risen in revolt when the Russians invaded the country. "Turkish Foreign Minister's Defense of the Armenian Massacres," *Current History Magazine*, December 1915.

<<http://www.cilicia.com/armol0c-nyt191612.html>>.

[44] Richard L. Rubenstein, *The Cunning of History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 11-12 and *The Age of Triage: Fear and Hope in an Overcrowded World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 12-19.

[46] Henry Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1919), 162-163. See also Balakian, *The Burning Tigris*, 169-170.

[46] Balakian, *The Burning Tigris*, 183.

[47] Richard Kloian, ed., *The Armenian Genocide: News Accounts from the American Press: 1915-1922* (Richmond, CA: Anto Publishing, 1988), XIII.

[48] Ara Sarafian, "The Absorption of Armenian Women and Children into Muslim Households as a Structural Component of the Armenian Genocide" in Bartov and Mack, *In God's Name*, 210.

[49] Sarafian, "The Absorption."

[50] Oscar Heizer, "Report on the treatment of Trebizond" to Ambassador Henry Morgenthau, 15 July 1915, forwarded to the Secretary of State, 20 July 1915, <www.armeniangenocide.org/us-7-20-15-text.html>.

[51] Sarafian, "The Absorption," 212-213.

[52] Sarafian, "The Absorption," 217.

[53] Suny, "Religion, Ethnicity," 50.

[54] Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 132-143.

[55] Yigal Carmon, "Contemporary Islamist Ideology Authorizing Genocidal Murder," MEMRI (Middle East Research Institute), 27 Jan. 2004, Special Report No. 25, http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=st&ID=SR2504#_edu2.

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