

Turkey's neo-Ottomanism and the End of another Armenian Population

by [Nikos Akritas](#) (June 2023)



Etude pour Violence, Jean Jansem, 2000

A century ago, the Armenian genocide was reaching its denouement in what is now modern Turkey. History, it would seem, if not for the current politics of Erdogan* and an extreme nationalist narrative pedalled by an enormously well-

funded state propaganda machine. Miso-Armenianism (Turkey's equivalent of anti-Semitism) has been a constant in Turkish politics and society for well over a century. It has its roots in the *dhimmi* status of Islam's People of the Book – infidels who are 'tolerated' (i.e. allowed to exist, for the most part but not always) in return for protection money, as long as they comply with their inferior status.

As infidels, Armenians, like other Christian communities, were despised under the Ottomans. The massacres perpetrated by Abdul Hamid II at the end of the 19th century, just one episode in what Benny Morris and Dror Ze'evi call *The Thirty-Year Genocide*, were a desperate reaction to potential further loss of imperial territory to ethnic groups clamouring for independence, as well as a strategy for keeping what was considered an inferior race in its place. The continuation of this policy towards the *gavur* (infidels) led to the more well-known genocide of 1915 in which Christians generally, and Armenians in particular, were massacred.

The current Turkish government-sanctioned view is 'only 600,000' Armenians were killed (other sources put the number at 1.5 million, before one adds other Christian minorities meeting a similar fate, such as the Assyrians and Greeks) and that what happened was not genocide but ethnic cleansing. This version of history asserts Armenians (women, children and the aged—not men between the ages of eighteen and sixty, as these had already been done away with) were merely marched to a desert, there was never an intention to exterminate them (although, a year prior to this decision, Ottoman parliamentary records reveal Muslim refugees were not to be settled in the exact same place because it was considered they would all die there). This desert was to be reached through inhospitable terrain, without access to food, water or shelter, and led by a special organization composed of cut-throats specifically released from prison for the task, the *Teshkilati Mahsusa*, referred to by one Ottoman army officer as

butchers of the human species. In addition, the route passed through bandit territory.

Contemporary reports of systematic mass murder, brutality, rape, enslavement, kidnap and torture are dismissed by today's Turkish government as Christian or Western propaganda (behind which lies an Armenian conspiracy). The problem with such assertions is that three of the countries making these reports had nothing to gain from spreading false claims. Two were Ottoman allies (Germany and Austria-Hungary) and the other (the USA) was neutral at the time. To further illustrate the vacuousness of conspiracy claims, some of the reporters were clearly anti-Armenian (such as the US consul Leslie Davies) and pro-Turkish.

The claim by nationalist historians that Turkey's state archives contain no records of such atrocities has, unintentionally, worked against them, given recorded archival purges and extremely suspect gaps in records. For example, the evidence from state archives used immediately after the First World War to convict ruling party members charged with crimes against humanity have all since gone missing. The Turkish government claims they were forgeries but this begs the question why, then, weren't they kept as evidence of forged propaganda and false records? –proving their fraudulent providence would surely work in favour of the nationalists' version of history. There are also virtually no state archives for orders pertaining to the *Teshkilati Mahsusa*. Given this unit was specially created to 'deal with' the Armenians, why are their orders and directives missing? Why, indeed, are so many state records missing of orders to provincial governors dealing with Armenians?

To the nationalists' chagrin, some documents throw light on these missing records; such as the recalling, punishing and, in some cases, execution of officials who refused to follow orders for, or to assist in, mass murder and an admonishment for killing non-Armenian Christians (implying Armenians were

targets of massacre). When it comes to lack of evidence, Turkey is alone in its claims. But this is not just a question of history. The social Darwinism the CUP, the ruling party at the time, subscribed to meant Armenians were believed to be an inferior race, in the same way Jews were viewed in Nazi Germany. The difference being, the Nazis and Germany were held accountable for the Holocaust and much work has since been done to understand, and learn lessons from, what led to such atrocities. The same cannot be said of Turkey's miso-Armenianism which continues into the present day.

The massacres of the 1890s were part of a wider policy to change the landscape and ethnic make-up of what is now eastern Turkey, which had always been considered the heartland of the indigenous Armenian population. World war provided a mask for the atrocities. The canards and stereotypes which existed then, much as they did for Jews in Nazi Germany, still exist in Turkey today. At the time of the genocide, which did not end in 1915 but continued into the 1920s, Armenians were considered parasites and tumours in society, which required removing.

State sponsored discrimination continued into the 1940s, including the *varlik vergisi*, aimed at ruining non-Muslim businesses (Armenian businesses were taxed at over 230%, whilst Muslims were taxed at less than 5%). The Istanbul pogroms of 1955 specifically targeted Greeks, Armenians and Jews and further legislation was passed in the 1970s aimed at appropriating Armenian and other non-Muslims' property and wealth. Even Kurdish separatism, especially since the 1980s, has been attributed to an Armenian conspiracy. Today, Turkish politicians routinely attempt to discredit their opponents by claiming they have Armenian roots and Media Watch reports that Armenians are the most targeted group for hate speech in Turkey's media. No surprise, given government-sanctioned school text-books portray Armenians as enemies of the state.

Soviet collapse saw the first Armenian-Azeri war in which

Armenians gained control of the historically contested areas around Nagorno-Karabakh. At the time, Turkey's involvement was limited—Soviet military power was still something to be feared. Not so during the second war, in which, rather than show diplomatic restraint and act as a responsible power in the region, Turkey's President Erdogan openly threatened Armenia not to get involved, as Turkish military drones and army officials clearly tipped the outcome in Azerbaijan's favour. Hostilities only ceased when Russian peacekeepers entered the region but these are now, largely due to the war in Ukraine, impotent.

Deployed to keep the Lachin corridor open, to supply the Armenian population of the mountainous region of Nagorno-Karabakh, the road is now blocked by the Azeris. No supplies get through. With power outages, lack of medical and other essential supplies, the people of Nagorno-Karabakh are hostages to Azeri and Turkish political and military machinations. If the war in Ukraine goes badly for Russia and it is forced to withdraw its troops along the Lachin corridor, this will spell the end of another Armenian population on their ancestral lands. Ethnic cleansing, at best, will ensue. Nagorno-Karabakh will be fully integrated into Azerbaijan and Turkey will have reduced the Armenian footprint further. The republic of Armenia will further be at the mercy of Turkey's political jockeying as the latter increasingly seeks to assert its dominance in the region—causing some to refer to a neo-Ottomanism.

Imperialism is a dirty word in Turkey, when used in reference to past European empires, but not when it comes to its own; there is great pride in Turkey's imperial past and an almost tangible excitement at the renewal of Turkish power. This includes claims to Greek islands and the Aegean with sorties regularly flown over Greek air space; all in a bid to provoke an international incident in order to negotiate rights of access to Greek waters and the revenues which might result

from ongoing oil and gas exploration—the discovery by Cyprus of energy reserves off its shores resulted in Turkey's claim to a share in that country's new potential wealth and the immediate dispatch of Turkish naval ships to the area where the exploration was taking place.

The continuing occupation of northern Cyprus, the humanitarian argument for which seems a nonsense given actions in direct contravention to the Geneva Convention not to change the population make-up of an occupied country (settler colonialism), ensures there can never be a solution involving just the native Cypriots. For, since its invasion of the island, Turkey has relocated mainland Turkish citizens en masse to northern Cyprus. It is now, to all intents and purposes, part of Turkey or, possibly more accurately, the continuing Turkish empire under another name.

Forays into Iraq and Syria and an increasing influence over the fate of the Kurds in those countries is part of a strategy to mitigate its own Kurdish problem, continuing to deny a population some fifteen million strong (in Turkey alone) their independence. Westerners would be appalled if Turkey were to make claims to independent countries, arguing they were once part of the Ottoman Empire. Yet, never allowing the Kurds of Turkey independence (and doing its utmost to deny the same to Kurds in surrounding countries) doesn't seem as objectionable—and so the empire continues. With troops in Libya and a permanent military base in Qatar, the Turkish army is stationed in five former Ottoman territories – three as a result of invasion.

The Turkish people, some of the warmest and friendliest I've ever come across, are, unfortunately, fed a constant diet of state propaganda and alternative views are silenced using Article 301 of the country's penal code, making it an offence to insult Turkishness (but who decides what that is and what constitutes an insult?). Many believe since there is no existing written record of an order to kill all Armenians that

to claim this was state policy is a lie and individuals have been punished using Article 301 for expressing such views. They are unaware of the purges of state archives, diplomatic records of other countries (including those of its allies), objections by some Turkish officials at the time (who should be lauded as humanitarian heroes) and discrepancies in Ottoman communication records. The retort that 'only 600,000' Armenians were killed seeks, in some warped way, to lessen the severity of what happened and the often cited argument 'being marched to a desert has no moral equivalence to the gas chambers' to callously grade the horrors of genocide according to some league of atrocities.

Turkey's foreign policy is expansionist, stuck in a time warp of a century ago. There are no politicians from countries bordering Turkey laying claim to Turkish lands. Unfortunately, the reverse is not true. And this from a country which in wealth and military might dwarfs its neighbours. Turkey's GDP places it in the top twenty wealthiest countries on the planet, even with its current economic woes—none of its neighbours come in the top fifty (Armenia's is 118th), yet Turkish foreign policy is one of paranoia, seeing threats from every one of its neighbours. Turkey has the second largest army in NATO and makes its own military drones.

Not held accountable for its actions as one of the Central Powers during the First World War, Turkish foreign policy is Ottoman imperialism by another name. However, because it is not viewed as part of the West (the overwhelming majority of the population is Muslim) liberals seem to view criticism of it as Western chauvinism and anti-Islamic. But by taking this stance it seems only Western imperialism was nefarious or had any legacy which resonates today. If liberals understand how those hailing from former imperial territories are still affected, impoverished and traumatized by European Empire, what of the Ottomans? Turkey still occupies the Kurdish homelands and is a dominant regional power but portrays itself

to the rest of the world as a victim of the West. The Ottoman Empire was part of the Great Power system of Europe. Britain, Russia and France were all allies of the Ottomans at one point or another, depending on their perceived interests. As its power diminished others sought to take advantage of it, not because it was Muslim but to advance their own imperial ambitions, as all empires do.

Since the Cold War, Turkey has been an important ally of the West, taking advantage of this fact to continue its dire human rights record and imperial rhetoric to the present day. It is often said the next rising powers to watch out for are those sitting on the margins of great power politics, waiting to take advantage of any given situation. The chaos in the Middle East has played to Turkey's advantage, allowing it to flex its military muscle in neighbouring countries and increase suppression of its Kurdish minority. Russia's weakening will also allow Turkey to assist its staunch ally, Azerbaijan, in reducing Nagorno Karabakh's Armenian population and further compromise Armenia's independence and ability to be anything other than a satellite state. The Middle East and Eastern Europe will once again have to contend with an entity that sees its destiny as a world power and, potentially, heir to the Caliphate.

*This article was written before the outcome of Turkey's general election was known but the author contends, regardless of the result, one thing will remain constant in Turkish politics—miso-Armenianism (a virulent hatred of Armenians and everything Armenian), as it is deeply ingrained in the fabric of society.

[Table of Contents](#)

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