
1915 and Beyond: Public Perception in Turkey

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About PODEM

Public Policy and Democracy Studies Association (Kamusal Politika ve Demokrasi alıřmaları DerneĖi, PODEM) is an independent think tank established in February 2015 in Istanbul, Turkey.

At PODEM, our vision is to contribute to the building of an environment in Turkey where the institutional and legal foundations for democracy are established, a democratic mind-set, societal peace and justice are embedded, and one that yields greater credibility to Turkey to facilitate regional and global peace and justice. Our mission is to understand and analyse through research the changing dynamics of Turkey's society, its relations with other societies and states and to translate our insights into policy suggestions.

FOREWORD

From PODEM...

The 'Armenian Question' continues to feature prominently in Turkey's democratisation process. Official expressions of condolences by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu were indeed significant gestures, however, many dimensions to the issue still beg for a resolution. Turkey needs to guarantee the rights of its Armenian citizens equally and in fairness, mend its relations with Armenia, build a constructive dialogue with the international Armenian diaspora and more effectively manage the genocide issue from a foreign policy perspective.

1915 and Beyond: Public Perception in Turkey is PODEM's first report. It is published as we celebrate our first anniversary, and as such, represents a meaningful step forward. At the same time, this report is the first publication drawn from the research conducted within the scope of our 'Turkey and Armenians' research stream. This particular stream brings together our work on 'Turkey-Armenia relations' and the 'Armenian diaspora'.

Through this new research stream, PODEM researchers utilize their substantial research and advocacy experience on the 'Armenian Question' to introduce a wider range of perspectives to the public debate and propose actionable policy solutions. Additionally, PODEM seeks to understand the expectations of various communities and groups on the 'Armenian Question' to measure their perception, identify their diverse approaches, and thereby, inform the policies of political actors in Turkey and abroad.

We will be releasing the results of this new research stream throughout the following weeks in anticipation that our insights and proposals will coax social and political actors into constructive dialogue and mutual understanding.

From the Authors...

Many subject-matter experts contributed to the ideation, planning, execution and analysis stages of this research report. Etyen Mağcupyan initiated the idea, supported us throughout the implementation of the research and analysed the findings to deliver a final commentary. Özge Genç worked with us on planning the research. She made significant contributions to defining the research scope, reaching out to key contacts and preparing the report for publication. Ayşe Yırcalı also offered her generous support to this project from the point of inception until the launch of the report. We consulted her several times and she graciously invested much of her time to help produce the final output. Beril Bahadır joined us in conducting several interviews as part of this research and assisted in their transcription. She too helped with the preparation of this report for publication. Finally, Zeynep Gülöz supported us with the pre-publication processes. Therefore, we thank all of the above-mentioned colleagues for their support and contributions to this project. Likewise, we are grateful to the PODEM team for entrusting us with this research idea and encouraging us to see it through the research and writing processes.

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This report would not have been possible without the valued contribution of our interviewees and research participants, whose names we are not at liberty to disclose, but to whom we owe a debt of gratitude for their time and honesty.

Finally, we send our heartfelt thanks to PODEM members for generously supporting our research and reporting.

Table of Contents

8 Introduction

10 Chapter 1: Analysis of Focus Group Workshops

11 In Retrospect: The History and Perceptions of Genocide

15 Current Developments: Official Condolence Messages and Changing the Rhetoric on 1915

19 Armenians of Turkey

23 Turkey-Armenia Relations

25 Future Expectations and Proposals

28 Chapter 2: Analysis of In-depth Interviews

28 In Retrospect: The History and Perceptions of Genocide

32 Current Developments: Official Condolence Messages and Changing the Rhetoric on 1915

36 Armenians of Turkey

38 Turkey-Armenia Relations

40 Future Expectations and Proposals

43 Conclusion

Introduction

1915 and Beyond: Public Perception in Turkey is framed around understanding and analysing public perceptions in Turkey on the so-called 'Armenian Question'. This report shares the findings of 10 focus group workshops organised between 12-27 May 2015 in Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Adana, Kayseri, Diyarbakır, Trabzon and Kars, and 26 in-depth interviews conducted in Istanbul and Ankara between May 2015 and January 2016.

Social Research Center (Sosyal Araştırma Merkezi, SAM) coordinated the organisation of focus group workshops in 8 cities with a total of 82 participants (36 women and 46 men) aged between 18 and 55. One of the focus group meetings brought together participants who were Armenians of Turkey. The in-depth interviews carried out by the authors were with lawyers, civil society representatives, academics, journalists, authors, politicians, business people and former diplomats of all ages and political leanings. Of the 26 in-depth interviewees, five were Armenians of Turkey. Our main motivation while building this sample was to capture broad insights on a very specific research question. Thus, we do not—and never will—attempt to pursue research that would lead to generalised or categorical conclusions about a particular community or communities.

This report portrays the public perception in Turkey towards 1915, Armenians of Turkey's perceptions of their presence in the country and the perceptions of Turkish society towards Armenians in both Turkey and Armenia. The 24th of April, 1915 signifies a historical process whereby Armenians within the Ottoman Empire were deported and massacred during World War I. While Armenians across the world recognise and commemorate April 24, 1915, and the subsequent events as a genocide, both official accounts of history in Turkey and the majority of Turkey's society oppose this characterisation.

When we refer to 1915, we are not simply talking about a point in time and the events surrounding it. Until recently, our politics were tainted by feelings of animosity towards Armenians and this perception of the Armenian as the 'enemy' caused far too many grievances. The on-going debate on 1915 has a sizeable impact on Turkey's domestic and foreign policy, and on the public perceptions towards Armenians. Thus, our objectives with this report are to shed light on the 'Armenian Question', which remains under-addressed by the majority of the society in Turkey and continues to manifest itself as a 'problem', and capture the myriad public perceptions, thoughts and expectations surrounding it.

The 'Armenian Question' covers not just a historical reading of 1915, but also the rights of Armenians of Turkey and minorities; cross-border relations between Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan; and even Turkey's relationship with the 'West'. We find that after a century since 1915, the events surrounding that particular cross-section of history and how they are defined still determine perceptions of the society towards Armenians, Armenia and the West.

The 'Armenian Question' may be more easily and widely discussed today but the public debate on this issue will need to be expanded and deepened. *1915 and Beyond: Public Perception in Turkey* aims to contribute to the deepening of the public discourse around the 'Armenian Question'. The research brings together several key insights on how the genocide debates are being perceived by the wider public. We expect these insights to inform the decision-makers seeking to place the society and the individual at the heart of their policies. This research report does not limit its scope to the more commonplace questions around the 'Armenian Question'; it also delivers deeper insights drawn from the personal narratives and histories of its interviewees and their current political views. Through these personal narratives, this research report conveys an honest account of the differences and similarities between perceptions and offers actionable policy solutions.

Chapter 1: Analysis of Focus Group Workshops

Within the scope of our focus group research, 10 workshops were organised in Istanbul, Izmir, Ankara, Diyarbakir, Adana, Kayseri, Trabzon and Kars between 12-27 May 2015. The focus groups were formed miscellaneously to include Turkish, Kurdish and Armenian participants who were either male or female and aged anywhere between 18 and 55. At least 8 participants joined each workshop and the focus group workshops together hosted a total of 82 participants.

TABLE 1: FOCUS GROUPS

DATE	CITY	GENDER	CATEGORY	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	AGE BRACKETS
12 MAY	Istanbul	Mixed	Armenian	8	18-55
13 MAY	Istanbul	Mixed	Young people	8	18-24
14 MAY	Istanbul	Mixed	Young people	8	18-24
18 MAY	Izmir	Female only	Women	8	25-55
19 MAY	Ankara	Male only	Public servants	9	25-55
20 MAY	Diyarbakır	Mixed	Mixed	8	25-55
22 MAY	Adana	Female only	Women	8	25-55
23 MAY	Kayseri	Male only	Men	9	25-55
26 MAY	Trabzon	Male only	Men	8	25-55
27 MAY	Kars	Mixed	Mixed	8	25-55

Focus group discussions were framed around public perceptions in Turkey towards 1915; the genocide debate; the situation of Armenians of Turkey; recent steps taken by the state on 1915; and Turkey-Armenia relations. The full list of discussion themes are as follows:

- Changing society and politics in Turkey
- What happened in 1915: genocide, official history and freedom of expression
- Thoughts on the "History Commission"
- Perceptions towards the Erdoğan-Davutoğlu condolence messages

- Opinions about the 2015 Çanakkale commemoration events
- Perceptions of third country positions on the issue of genocide
- Attitudes towards Turks who recognize genocide
- Whether Armenians of Turkey are perceived as “equal citizens”: discrimination and issues of trust
 - Sense of community and neighbourly relations among Armenians of Turkey
 - Marriage and Armenians of Turkey
 - Commerce and Armenians of Turkey
- Turkey-Armenia relations

1.1. In Retrospect: The History and Perceptions of Genocide

One striking finding from the focus group workshops is the vast difference in the interpretation of history between the participants in the all-Armenian focus group and others. The discussions in the all-Armenian focus group workshop demonstrated how interested and informed its participants were in history and how clear they were about denominating the events of 1915 a genocide. In all other focus group workshops, the participants were disinterested in history, in a broader sense, and under-informed on 1915 in particular. When asked whether the events of 1915 were a genocide, these participants unanimously rejected the possibility.

Different levels of information, understanding and narratives could therefore be observed between the Armenian community and other communities in Turkey. Armenians of Turkey adopted a more emotional approach to the issue, whereas other communities were more reactive in their tone. In the workshops that did not include Armenians of Turkey, the participants often played back the official historical account of 1915. Specifically, they asserted that Armenians were, at the time, roused by foreign powers to turn against their countryfolk with which they had lived together peacefully thus far.

Excluding the participants of the focus group seating only Armenians of Turkey, a mere 2 of the remaining 74 participants in 8 workshops defined the events of 1915 as a genocide. The majority completely dismissed the possibility of genocide and claimed that Armenians lost their lives during ‘migration’ and due to the inevitably difficult circumstances of war.

“Wartime conditions were harsh, with hunger and disease all around. That is what caused the Armenians’ calamity.” (Istanbul, female, 21, university student)

“... one of the direct consequences of migration was how people perished due to harsh winter conditions and disease...” (Ankara, male, 37, public servant)

When asked on how to best define 1915, participants used terms such as displacement, deportation, deaths caused by war, precautionary measures against treason, relocation and genocide with rightful cause. Most participants highlighted that Armenians, at the time, took advantage of a weakened Ottoman Empire and organized uprisings which were supported by foreign powers to carve out their own nation-state and moreover, that scores

of Ottoman Turks were also killed in the process. A majority of the accounts shared by focus group participants referred to the official historical narrative, which strongly emphasizes the element of 'treason'.

"Armenians were instigated by foreign powers and attacked Turks. Turks only responded in self-defence." (Istanbul, male, 18, university student)

Most participants coupled the assertion that 'Armenians were traitors' with the afterthought that 'they got what they deserved'. Some of the discussions in the focus group workshops revealed that participants believed Turks were both victims of treason and treated unfairly.

"Why, of all the other different ethnic groups that inhabit the region, would the Armenians have been singled out? At the time, ethnic Turks were also subjected to extreme pressure. How come we, as Turks, do not interpret those events as a genocide and yet the Armenians do?" (Istanbul, female, 21, university student)

Some participants stated that the level of coordination demanded to commit genocide was not possible to realise at the time, when the Ottoman Empire was at war. They suggested that as Armenians were being deported, their safety was a concern for the authorities. Others reasoned that had there been a genocide against Armenians then, there would not have been an Armenian community living in Turkey right now.

A common sense of denial against the portrayal of Turks as 'genocidal' is observed. Participants associated genocide with the history of Nazi Germany and the shared horror of crimes against Jewry at the time. Therefore, they could not fathom Turks as perpetrators of such sinister acts. Most participants agreed with the principle that they would not dare label their ancestors as criminals. A 36-year-old public servant from Kayseri quipped during one focus group discussion, "the Turkish nation and bestiality cannot be considered synonymously", and his point of view was shared by the majority of participants.

Two other participants reflected their thinking in the following statements:

"I don't believe it was a genocide. If we're talking about an event that occurred in 1915, then it belongs to the Ottoman Era. That's it. Lives would have been lost, for sure. But I refuse to accept that it was a genocide. When has there been any other period or administration in our history that has committed genocide? Why would I think therefore, that there was an Armenian genocide?" (Ankara, male, 28, public servant)

"I agree with the comment made here earlier that had we intended to commit genocide, there would not have been a single Armenian left alive. Consider the acts of Adolf Hitler against European Jewry between 1935-45 and you find that there are gas chambers and burning of bodies. During the [Ottoman Era], we only had arms. Allegedly, we were forcing these people into migration and we had the freedom to kill whenever we wished." (Ankara, male, 33, public servant)

Contrary to these views, some participants reflected on the suffering and plight of Armenians of Turkey. Broadly, they expressed their condolences with all the peoples who suffered

throughout the First World War and admitted that Armenians had suffered 'some atrocities'. What needs to be underlined here is that regardless of their expression of sympathy, these participants regarded the suffering of the Armenian community at the time as a direct outcome of the wrongful acts of rioting Armenians, who waged a war against the state. By drawing on a distinction between unoffending and rioting Armenians, these participants pointed out that the unruly behaviour of Armenian gangs led to the suffering of their innocent brothers and sisters. A few focus group participants admitted that Armenians were massacred. However, they presented these killings as a consequence of war.

The Armenian genocide conversation, which ensues outside of Turkey, was a separate discussion theme during the focus group workshops. All participants reacted negatively to the decisions by third country parliaments to recognise the Armenian genocide and the attempts to force its recognition on to Turkey. Particularly those efforts in the West to push for genocide recognition were perceived as "policies seeking to undermine and divide Turkey by Western countries that do not wish for Turkey to be powerful." Some participants suggested that this issue is best addressed between the two nations, without any interference from the outside.

"Anyone can see through Americans' real intentions; they are a Hydra, the double-headed snake. They back Armenia while pretending to support us." (Istanbul, male, 23, university student)

"... Let's say the worst issue is the Palestinian one. No one places an embargo on Israel. But when it comes to Turkey, they persistently chase a so-called genocide claim for events that occurred 100 years ago. The real intent is to undermine Turkey and to divide its peoples. They are after Turkey because of its valuable geopolitical position. We have a prime location." (Istanbul, male, 18, university student)

In contrast, Armenians of Turkey were quite clear about recognising the events of 1915 as a genocide. They highlighted that all Armenians share a painful past, amid which younger generations of Armenians in Turkey are growing up.

"There isn't one Armenian family today without a member who perished during the genocide. Everyone has heard a story from 1915, told by a grandparent. Even today, there are surviving witnesses to the genocide." (Istanbul, female, 22, university student)

"Families that have survived the genocide were torn apart. Those that remained in Turkey converted to Islam and their relatives that managed to relocate abroad remained Christian." (Istanbul, male, 55, shop owner)

Most Armenian participants at the focus group workshops mentioned that their communities were also protected by Turks at the time and expressed gratitude for the critical role of the latter to ensure the former's families' survival.

"By the way, some Armenian children were sheltered and protected by Muslim families. We descended from those children who survived. Had Muslims not sheltered Armenian children, we would not have been alive today." (Istanbul, female, 45, housewife)

Armenian participants underlined that they are not primarily preoccupied with the genocide debate today. Rather, Armenians of Turkey seek the recognition of their existence in Turkey as equal citizens, free from persecution, state oppression, fear and the urge to conceal their true identity. Two workshop participants voiced these thoughts in the following words:

"As long as non-Armenians react to us with statements such as 'I refuse to talk to or collaborate with a foreigner', there will never be a solution. If these perceptions can be altered and a sense of equality around citizenship can be built, then we could all achieve very joyful lives." (Istanbul, male, 55, shop owner)

"They ask me what I am and I respond, I'm a Christian. Then they tell me that I look too brown to be a Christian. Well, I tell them I'm an Arab too. They then ask me when I converted to Christianity. I respond that I hadn't converted and we, Christians, were part of this land too. Well, I dare say..." (Istanbul, male, 42, shop owner)

At the workshop with Armenian participants only, a sense of pessimism around how 1915 is discussed in Turkey is observed. The participants agreed that 1915 could be more widely debated now than before, yet, they added that talking too much about 1915 would invite trouble. One participant commented that there would be very few Armenians who would openly discuss 1915 because of the bitter lesson learnt after Hrant Dink's death. Others said that in the present environment, where even Turks were facing difficulties expressing their opinion, it would be highly unlikely that minorities would speak up.

"... as I said, in a country where freedom of expression is not extended even to its own people the Turks how can we expect minorities to have a voice?" (Istanbul, male, 42, shop owner)

On the other hand, Hrant Dink's assassination led to the recognition of Armenians in Turkey's society and fired up the public debate on 1915. One Armenian participant had this to say about Hrant Dink's assassination:

"There are only a handful of Armenians who could talk about genocide publicly and to the media...Hrant Dink was the only person in Turkey who could do this artfully and gracefully, without holding any grudges. So he stood in front of everyone on TV and declared his love for this country and that he wasn't going anywhere. He could have left Turkey. Alas, he was murdered." (Istanbul, male, 55, shop owner)

A participant from Izmir described the change brought about by Hrant Dink's passing in the following words:

"It was after Hrant Dink's assassination that the wider public acknowledged Armenians' existence. Before that, they were not aware of how Armenians were discriminated against and condescended to. I believe Hrant Dink had a lot to do with building a newfound awareness." (Izmir, female, 35, housewife)

One point often raised by participants in focus groups without Armenian participants was how 1915 was a feature of Ottoman history, buried in the past. Most participants suggested to move on from thinking about 1915 and adopt a forward-looking approach, mirroring the generic public opinion that “Turks choose to forget whereas Armenians choose to remember”. They asserted that it was unnecessary to dig into the past and stir up debates on foregone events. Comparatively, other participants referenced Germany as a case of coming to terms with the past and cautioned that forgetting or denying such traumas was not only impossible but also potentially dangerous, as history could always repeat itself. It was suggested that, “to prevent future conflict, it is important to issue sentences to perpetrators of past conflicts.”

It is concluded that while there was not a singular position on remembering or forgetting the past, most of the discussions observed suggested that an exercise of coming to terms with the past—which has not been attempted yet in Turkey—would be welcomed by the general public.

1.2. Current Developments: Official Condolence Messages and Changing the Rhetoric on 1915

The ‘Armenian Question and 1915’, which have for many years been treated as rarely-discussed taboos, are more recently being debated publicly and widely. Brought back into the spotlight after Hrant Dink’s assassination in 2007, the Armenian question found a new platform for public debate with the amendment to Article 301 of the Turkish Criminal Code in 2008. Prior to that, references to 1915 were penalized. However, more recently, there has been some softening around the legal framework addressing 1915, which has triggered the emergence of an alternative discourse and shackled the official narrative’s hegemony on the events. As a result, the state’s narrative has also changed, becoming coupled with some concrete steps, such as the return of immovable properties to minority foundations and the restoration projects carried out in multiple locations in Turkey on historical sites of worship for Armenians.

The peak of this transformation in the state’s stance on the Armenian question came on April 23, 2014, when former Prime Minister Erdogan released a public statement in nine languages, including Armenian, to offer his condolences to the grandchildren of people who have lost their lives in 1915. His statement described the deportation of Armenians as “an event with inhumane consequences” and as such, created ripples across public opinion in Turkey and abroad. In his letter, Erdogan revisited his 2005 proposal to Robert Kocharyan, the former President of Armenia, to establish a joint history commission comprised of Turkish, Armenian and international historians to shed light on 1915, and suggested that the work of such a commission would generate a better understanding of history.

Furthermore, in 2014, then-Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu commissioned a research, “A Just Memory for All”, to explore the pathways to a fairer representation of history for Turks and Armenians. The Davutoğlu-pioneered intellectual exercise introduced a new dimension to the public debate on 1915. In 2015, during the 1915 centennial, then-Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu made a public announcement where he underlined Turkey’s historical and moral responsibility to commemorate Ottoman Armenians and Armenian cultural heritage. As he expressed his condolences to the grandchildren of Ottoman Armenians who perished in 1915, he also highlighted the Turkish government’s objective to seek a just memory for all.

This opening of the 1915 debate and how it was perceived was a key point of discussion during the focus group workshops.

In the all-Armenian workshop, participants claimed that the condolence messages and the broadening of the 1915 debate by the state were not well-received by their communities, as most people found these public acts to be insincere. Denying genocide on the one hand and releasing official condolence messages on the other seemed contradictory to the participants. They believed that these letters only served to sweep the issue under the carpet and collectively forget the past.

"Our President said 'I don't recognise genocide'. The next day, he said 'I offer my sympathies and condolences. Now, therein lies a great contradiction.'" (Istanbul, male, 55, shop owner)

"The official condolence letter suggests divorcing what happened in the past from the politics of the present. In other words, it's an invitation to forget the past and turn over a new leaf. However, these minorities have been robbed of their money, homes, everything. These people ask for what's rightfully theirs to be returned. How will that happen? They cannot make a claim for their rights. Because if Turkey recognises its involvement, then it will have to reimburse the Armenians." (Istanbul, male, 42, shop owner)

During the focus group discussions with Armenians, participants often alluded to their mistrust toward the state. Similarly, their lack of trust was evident in the way they perceived the public statements of condolences. They particularly conveyed that due to the unchanged portrayal of Armenians in history books as traitors and villains, they do not consider the state's symbolic moves to reconcile with Armenians of Turkey as genuine:

"... instead of making official statements to communicate sympathy, they should first take a look at the history books in schools. A week ago, they were singing to a different tune and now they stand in sympathy with Armenians? I find that hard to believe. I think they're simply after more votes." (Istanbul, male, 32, accountant)

Armenians strongly believed that the Turkish state discriminates against non-Muslims, especially Armenians. And by extension, different forms of discrimination are also existent in social relationships, media and across the political spectrum.

Official condolence messages and debates on 1915 were also widely discussed in focus group workshops bringing non-Armenian participants together. These discussions featured different perceptions and reactions to these public messages; some participants perceived Erdogan and Davutoğlu's statements very positively, while others found such statements to be unnecessary.

Those with a positive opinion towards official condolence messages felt that these letters took a solid stance against both genocide believers and disbelievers and as such, promoted the striking of a resolution between these camps:

"Sharing the pain of lives lost, responding with such a gesture was, in my opinion, very valuable from a political and moral standpoint. Abdullah Gul's visit to a football game in

Armenia, Erdogan's condolence letter and Davutoğlu's message, together signify their invitation to resolve this long-lived issue." (Kayseri, male, 36, public servant)

"I think this is a very refreshing message. It seems to be telling Armenia that Turkey is taking a positive step forward and invites them to reciprocate. It also says to the West that there may have been some unpleasant events in the past, but today, Turkey is taking a milder approach and seeks peace; so let's build a peaceful future together." (Istanbul, male, 25, university student)

"Now, I think the government's approach to this issue is very well-crafted. As commented here earlier, what happened in the past, happened, and none of us alive today can be held responsible. Nor can our fathers, their fathers and our children [assume any responsibility]." (Trabzon, male, 43, banker)

Some participants interpreted these messages as a politically smart move to contain the issue without it getting out of hand and to avoid potential future liabilities in the form of reparations:

"Well, I assume they don't want this genocide debate to go on for much longer. It's impossible for them to recognise genocide because of the potential burden such recognition would bring. A consequence could even be to hand over some land to Armenia. No country or politician would be ok with that." (Istanbul, female, 24, university student)

In the same vein, some participants interpreted these official messages as tactical, so as to to increase political support to those who delivered them.

"I think this is a politically clever move. There are liberal Armenians and their support is politically significant. There are scores of Armenians, Kurds and Alevis who support the AKP and there are liberal conservative supporters of the party, too. These messages are designed to attract a specific audience which the party is targeting." (Izmir, female, 25, university student)

"This could be a pre-election tactic. Erdogan could have been attempting to rally support for his candidacy for President in 2014. I cannot remember Erdogan ever sounding so soft on the issue of genocide before." (Istanbul, male, 18, university student)

Alternatively, some participants quite powerfully expressed that they found the condolence messages to be out of place and unnecessary. This notion was supported by two main arguments: first, that Armenians were not the only peoples that perished during the war; and second, that expressions of condolence by state leaders would be interpreted inevitably as an admission to having committed genocide. Participants who held this view were also of the opinion that official messages would encourage Armenians to pursue genocide recognition more firmly.

"I refuse to accept anything that was said as part of those messages, because there has not been any crime committed. Every war leads to casualties and innocent lives are lost. Moreover, it wasn't just Armenian lives that were lost. If we do not accept the genocide claim, then communicating any message seems unnecessary." (Istanbul, female, 21, university student)

The following statements were made by participants who believed that the official condolence messages would be interpreted as an admission of guilt and even as the Turkish state's acknowledgement of Armenian claims.

"This type of message means admission of guilt. They are seen to be apologising for events that they acknowledge as having not happened." (Diyarbakır, female, 43, housewife)

"Communicating condolences means accepting guilt. Why else would anyone send a condolence message?" (Diyarbakır, female, 35, housewife)

"Let me tell you this: do Armenians commemorate April 24 as the day of the Armenian genocide? Yes. When Turkey disseminates an official condolence message on the same day, what could that mean other than saying 'yes, we accept your genocide commemoration and respond with our condolences?" (Ankara, male, 33, public servant)

"Now, wouldn't a condolence message stir up Armenian hopes? Wouldn't it lead to a misunderstanding?" (Kars, female, 25, housewife)

One positive observation is that all participants were aware of the public messages of condolences and commemoration made in 2014-5 around the Armenian question. This testifies to the broadening of the public debate on 1915 and the Armenian question after 2014.

While most participants criticised the selection of April 24, 2015 as the day to commemorate the Battle of Canakkale/Dardanelles' centennial, some participants thought it was a politically wise move:

"For instance, we are inviting a deeper exploration of the historical archives and a wider debate on what happened. However, these types of official messages by the government defeat the purpose and seem hypocritical. On the one hand, you are sending condolence messages; and on the other hand, you politicise the commemoration of the Battle of Çanakkale. Genocide supporters are then encouraged to think that the Turkish government is cornered into focusing on petty issues." (Istanbul, male, 21, university student)

"I find moving the commemoration date from March 18 to April 24 to be disrespectful to the memory of those who fought in the Dardanelles. Why have so many people commemorated the Battle of Çanakkale on March 18 for so long then? I most definitely think this betrays the memory of the fallen soldiers and is disrespectful." (Istanbul, female, 20, university student)

"We all know how the Armenian diaspora are able to keep this issue on the global agenda and that is part of why we are so concerned. In effect, this [moving the commemoration date to April 24] is trying to serve the same purpose of manipulating the global public opinion. It attempts to rival the Armenian genocide recognition campaign. It seeks to move the world's attention from the issue of the Armenian genocide to the commemoration of the Battle of Dardanelles." (Trabzon, male, 43, banker)

"If we hadn't organised a counter attack on this year's Armenian genocide centennial, we would have had to endure the paranoia that surrounds April 24 every year again." (Trabzon, male, 50, professional)

1.3. Armenians of Turkey

Another key set of issues discussed at the focus group workshops were Armenians of Turkey, their status and their treatment as equal citizens. The main conclusion from those discussions is that Turks and Armenians were equally distrustful towards one another. Mutual distrust shapes social relationships and perceptions to a great extent.

Almost all non-Armenian participants in our focus groups supported the idea that in principle, every citizen of the Republic of Turkey ought to be granted equal rights. One university student from Istanbul commented that she did not consider Armenians of Turkey as minorities but instead, considered them equal citizens. Another participant referred to the Ottoman Era as a time when "no member of one community had any issues with the members of another community", as opposed to present-day Turkey, where minorities live as if "they are foreigners".

"I have Kurdish and Armenian friends. I've never viewed them as minorities; they are citizens, as am I. I don't think they are any different. Calling them minorities is simply wrong." (Istanbul, female, 21, university student)

"We should emulate the Ottoman society... There were, at the time, maybe 20, say 20 to 30 minority groups. Not a single group had any problems with the others. Now, for example, when you go to Taksim, you see these homes that used to belong to the minorities. They live here as if they are foreigners. I think this is wrong. I mean, we should accept them a little bit more, like they are citizens, like us; and we should treat everyone with respect." (Istanbul, male, 23, university student)

However, when the discussion advanced to specific issues, the meta-narrative about equal citizenship lost its initial allure. As the conversation explored everyday examples, participants began to describe Armenians and all other minorities as "foreigners" or "guests". Those who referred to Armenians as minorities could in the same breath suggest that Armenians of Turkey were granted "a bit too much freedom".

"Armenians are at great liberty in Turkey; they enjoy far too much freedom. What I mean by minorities are Armenians and the Laz. Forget about the Laz though because Armenians are by far the most vocal. What more are they asking for from this country?" (Ankara, male, 26, public servant)

A discriminatory mind-set emerged in greater clarity when discussing the occupations that Armenians could fill. A significant number of participants agreed that Armenians should not hold high-ranking public service positions, such as judgeships and high military office. However, that Armenians take part in the compulsory military service even when it means, "assuming some risks" was acknowledged as a positive step towards their "association with the Turkish nation". In that context, most participants admitted to doubting Armenians' accounts of being abused

during their military service. The majority of comments about Armenians seemed to suggest that Turks see the former not as integral to the society, but as 'outsiders'. Perceiving Armenians as outsiders not only justified discrimination, but also strengthened the conviction that Armenians of Turkey are second-tier citizens:

"Since they could hold any job they'd like, introducing some distinction between Turks and Armenians in terms of the occupations they could fill shouldn't be a major issue". (Istanbul, female, 20, university student)

"These may have taken place during the Ottoman Era. But there may have been acts of treason. Let me ask you something. Assuming a war broke out. Your Chief of Staff is battling against Armenia and he or she is Armenian. How would he or she react? That wouldn't inspire much confidence." (Ankara, male, 38, public servant)

"... If someone from a minority group became a judge, then that might lead to an erosion of trust. After all, a judge sits in a position of power with an ability to make decisions... trust could easily be broken there." (Istanbul, male, 22, university student)

"Minorities, Armenians, Greeks or Christians, they all have it easy. They are not being discriminated against. In addition, they live here as if it's their own country, right?" (Kayseri, male, 35, accountant)

"Well, they are able to live in Turkey, what more are they asking for?" (Istanbul, male, 24, university student)

Some of the participants who expressed the aforementioned opinions acknowledged that they were being discriminatory. However, they justified their positions by asserting their lack of trust towards Armenians. They added that the state ought to adopt a similar position towards minorities.

"... it might be morally wrong but we all remain doubtful and suspicious of minorities, because of the blow that we've been dealt in the past. I recognise that this is morally wrong though." (Trabzon, male, 46, agricultural engineer)

The participants of the focus group workshop that brought together Armenians of Turkey highlighted that both the definition of citizenship and the distinction between 'us' and 'them' were made in reference to Turkish and Muslim identities. Armenians admitted to feeling they were not being treated fairly and equally:

"Armenians are treated unfairly more often. Because being Armenian invokes feelings of fear in others, as if we are the bogeyman or crows scavenging their fields." (Istanbul, male, 42, shop owner)

"I think that Armenians, above all others, attract more attention and hatred. I mean the hate speech directed at us and also the unresolved Armenian question, i.e. the Armenian genocide issue. We are all Armenians here and we each have our own fears. We all fear persecution. I mean, this fear goes back to the beginning of the 1900s. Yes, there is a

significant trust issue. We are literally paranoid. This country does not look favourably upon non-Turks and non-Muslims. I realise, however, that I am more perceptive of the hostility because I am Armenian.” (Istanbul, female, 22, university student)

Armenians clearly spoke of their sense of insecurity in Turkey and indicated that they do not trust the society at large, including the police, the media and other state institutions. They added that what happened in the past implicates a sense of insecurity about the future.

“Distrust has reached new heights. Who could we trust? Our media chooses not to portray any news about the injustices rendered to minorities. The media plays an important role here. I do not trust any media organisation, even those that claim to be ‘non-partisan’. The media could fix this, but I think instead, they incite hatred. It’s exactly like the animal kingdom. The strongest is the one who rules. What could we possibly claim? Who could we go to for help when we know that the police would answer our calls for assistance with derogatory remarks” (Istanbul, male, 42, shop owner)

To elicit deeper insights on the current state of being Armenian in Turkey and the perceptions towards Armenians, we asked focus group participants who were not Armenians how they related to Armenians in their daily lives. For instance, we inquired how they got along with their Armenian neighbours, if they had any; whether they engaged in commercial relations with Armenians; and what they thought about potentially marrying an Armenian of Turkey or learning to speak their language. On the issue of marriage, the key points raised by participants centered on the differences in religion and culture. Even those who claimed they would consider marriage with an Armenian voiced their opinion in a tone of hesitation and distrust:

“I would not give my daughter away to an Armenian. Why not? Well, for cultural reasons... I’m not even talking about Islam here. If she enters an Armenian family, she will likely be bullied for being Turkish. Ultimately, they are Armenian and represent the Armenian culture, which will define the family traditions. We already know that the relationship with a mother-in-law is difficult. But putting that aside, I would not wish my daughter to be humiliated for being Turkish”. (Istanbul, female, 20, university student)

“Eventually, the person you marry, will come from a culture and religion that are different from yours. Even with a friend, these differences may feel awkward. But in marriage, you spend your whole life with that person, inhabiting the same house, all the time. After a while, certain things may start to bother you. Also, consider that you will have children together.” (Istanbul, male, 22, university student)

Focus group participants looked more favourably upon doing business with Armenians. One participant commented, “don’t look a gift horse in the mouth” to suggest that he did not mind where and with whom he made his profits. Another participant admitted that he “unfortunately” trusted Armenians more than Turks in commerce. Some participants noted that prophet Mohammad engaged in commercial relationships with Christians and so could they:

“If you have already formed a dialogue with him or her and established trust, then why not do business together? Our Prophet Mohammad was also doing business with Christians at the time.” (Adana, female, 25, housewife)

"Commercial relationships are ok because there are rules governing commerce and as long as those rules are kept, then there's no problem." (Kayseri, male, 43, enterprise owner)

"I'd like to note that there are no problems between individuals. The entire issue is political. I can sit down and talk about anything with an Armenian whom I do business with and he or she is an exemplary businessperson. I swear to God, they are far more professional than we are. He keeps his books organized and is well aware of how much is owed and paid out, down to the penny." (Kayseri, male, 43, public servant)

Focus group discussions revealed that most participants did not know Armenians very well. Based on hearsay and very limited information, they built their perception of a generic 'minority' and a specific category for the 'Armenian'. This imagined 'Armenian' community lives comfortably in Turkey, is able to practice their religion and speak their language freely. On the other hand, the participants also recognised that Armenians in Turkey conceal their identities. The contradictions in their narratives are apparent but seemed insignificant to them.

While Armenians were presumed to live comfortably and freely in Turkey, the existing restrictions on their freedoms were also acknowledged and supported by the focus group workshop participants. For instance, the majority of participants believed that the prohibition on Armenians from holding higher public office in the judiciary or security sector made sense, considering Armenians' reputation for 'treason'. More broadly, a strong sense of distrust pervaded their thinking on Armenians in Turkey. Though participants talked about being school friends with Armenians or maintaining amicable neighbourly relations in the past, the overall impression they gave was not very promising.

Armenians of Turkey also possessed the same level of distrust towards Turks. Focus group participants subtly referred to the wealth tax policies of 1940s and the pogroms of 6-7 September 1955—through which the Turkish state selectively taxed non-Muslim minorities and targeted the Greek minority, respectively—to justify their positions of distrust. As a result, we concluded that insecurity and lack of trust are mutual. The Armenian participants of the focus group workshops declared that they often needed to hide their identities; felt discriminated against in daily life, during administrative processes and professional work; and official complaint mechanisms worked against them. Because of their religious differences and non-Turkish names, the Armenian participants sensed that they are easy targets for discrimination and explained that the distinction between 'us' and 'them' in Turkey is made along religious and ethnic lines.

In the focus group workshop that brought together Armenians of Turkey only, the participants noted that Turkey needed a paradigm shift. They were of the opinion that Armenians are facing systematic discrimination and though genocide recognition was significant, the more pressing issue for them is for the state to secure their status as equal citizens and take measures to stop discrimination.

"The most important issue is the mentality. The way others see us. As long as non-Armenians react to us with statements such as 'I refuse to talk to or collaborate with a foreigner', there will never be a solution. If those perceptions can be altered and a sense of equality around citizenship can be built, then we could all achieve very joyful lives." (Istanbul, male, 55, shop owner)

1.4. Turkey-Armenia Relations

Armenia declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 and emerged as an Eastern neighbour to Turkey. In the 25 years since its inception, Armenia and Turkey have not formed diplomatic relations. In response to the intensifying armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the Armenian invasion of Azerbaijani territories outside of Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkey closed its land border with Armenia in 1993. The only remaining direct transportation link between the two countries is air travel, with only a few cross-border flights per week. We asked the participants during the focus groups workshops to share their views on Turkey-Armenia relations, the closed border and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Specifically, we inquired on what they thought about opening the border between Turkey and Armenia, as well as Turkey's support to Azerbaijan during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Despite some minor differences in opinion, the majority of participants believed that the border should be opened conditionally. The prerequisite to opening the border for Turkey should be, in their opinion, the preservation of Turkey's cordial bilateral relations with Azerbaijan. Almost all focus group discussions revealed that participants assigned great value to Turkey's alliance with Azerbaijan, both economically and on the basis of shared ethnic lineage. Those who supported the idea of an open border with Armenia expected such a move to invigorate cross-border commercial activities.

In the focus group workshop with all-Armenian participants, the discussions also revolved around the benefits of an open border, both in terms of economic and social relations. The decision to keep the border closed was interpreted as a result of Turkey's alliance with Azerbaijan, which seemed to be a religiously/ethnically motivated relationship based on mutual political and economic interests:

"Let the border open up, cross-border commercial ties develop and people on both sides start communicating more freely with each other. My priority is for the economic relationship to develop. The population size in Armenia is 2.5 million. If you intend to do business there, you cannot reach the Armenian market directly. It would make more sense to enter through an open border." (Istanbul, male, 48, professional in a private company)

"But Armenia is Armenian, Azerbaijan is Muslim, 50% is political, natural gas-related and the rest is religiously motivated. At least, that's my opinion." (Istanbul, male, 42, shop owner)

In other focus group workshops, participants noted that Turkey needs to maintain its current position on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue to safeguard its bilateral relations with Azerbaijan. By extension, some participants suggested that Turkey ought to keep the border closed and remain committed to its current position on Nagorno-Karabakh. As the following statements suggest, some participants believe that the closed border took its toll only on Armenia and did not economically impact Turkey at all. They added that the closed border was Armenia's responsibility and a result of Armenia's politically reckless behaviour.

"We should consider this: if Turkey is not a party to the conflict, then what? Then, we will have turned our backs on the Azeris. That is why I put myself in their shoes and think that

if I were an Azeri, and if Turkey does nothing to support me, then the bilateral relations could be damaged; and so, an ultimatum needs to be made. In the end, Turkey is a larger state than Armenia. When we close the border, the Armenians will clearly have more to lose. How much is really at stake for Turkey here, after all? Azeris are like our brothers, living on a different land. I believe closing the border is the right decision.” (Istanbul, male, 22, university student)

“Opening the border would, in fact, immensely benefit Armenia. They are a state built on Azerbaijani land, with the backing of Russia. Forgive me, but I would tell them to know their place, protect their dignity and develop their economy. I would advise them to maintain cordial relations with Azerbaijan and with the Turkic republics.” (Istanbul, male, 21, university student)

“I absolutely support Turkey’s decision to be a party to the conflict. But we could open the border without breaking the hearts of our Azeri brothers. After the Nagorno-Karabakh issue is resolved, the border could be opened, in my opinion.” (Istanbul, male, 25, university student)

Only one participant expressed a diverging view from the majority and reminded everyone of the principle of non-partisanship for states that are not direct parties to armed conflict. The participant stated that he would expect nation-states around the world to adopt a non-partisan position on Armenian genocide claims and Turkey to remain non-aligned in a conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. At the end of his statement, however, he conceded that it was impossible for most states to follow the principle of non-partisanship:

“Now, Armenia and Azerbaijan are both sovereign nation-states, according to international law. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is therefore, an issue that concerns these two nation-states. Earlier, we discussed the deportation of Armenians and whether or not there was such a thing as an Armenian genocide. We were keen to solve existing issues between the two communities by engaging directly and only with Armenia. Turkey and Armenia are two sovereign nation-states and this is an issue we need to sort out as two states. When the border is closed, people cannot engage in commercial affairs and they are the ones to bear the brunt. What we are doing is placing undue stress on them, just to push for a solution that would favour Azerbaijan. This is how we act to resolve our problems with Armenia, while supporting non-partisanship and asking that no third party intervene in our bilateral issues. Well, wouldn’t the same reasoning apply to the problem between Azerbaijan and Armenia? While calling for non-partisanship on the one hand, interfering in favour of Azerbaijan on the other does not seem well-aligned with the law. Clearly, some problems between countries cannot be resolved according to the principle of non-partisanship.” (Trabzon, male, 43, banker)

An overall assessment of the perceptions surrounding Turkey-Armenia relations reveals that most participants could see the border opening without damaging Turkey’s relations with Azerbaijan. The official position often communicated by foreign policy spokespeople is that Turkey’s strong ties with Azerbaijan are the key reference point for Turkey-Armenia relations and for determining Turkey’s stance on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This official position resonates with society, as our focus group discussions show. At the same time, however,

the closed border has a negative impact on cities like Kars and hence, some participants underlined the potential economic and social benefits of opening the Turkey-Armenia border.

1.5. Future Expectations and Proposals

The final point of discussion at the focus group workshops was on the future of the 'Armenian Question and 1915'. All focus group participants commented that they did not expect a game-changing development there. Except for the Armenian participants, nobody really expected or desired a favourable outcome—or only a handful had such an expectation, if we were to offer an optimistic reading. In a way, no one seemed disturbed by the current situation. The Armenians of Turkey, however, expressed their anxiety, clear expectations and demands. They did not believe that a favourable outcome is likely, though. A rapprochement that has been in the pipeline for 100 years will never actually materialize, in their opinion.

The informal proposal of Turkish officials to set up a history commission made up of Turkish, Armenian and international historians, to run an independent study on 1915 was discussed at the focus group workshops. Since the proposal was first introduced by then-Prime Minister Erdogan in 2005, it has featured prominently in public debates centering on the Armenian question. Therefore, the majority of focus group workshop participants were familiar with the idea and had an opinion on it.

Most participants supported setting up a history commission to research the events of 1915. They stressed the importance of impartiality and offered several paths through which the appropriate combination of commission members could deliver a non-partisan research process and outcome. While most participants believed that historians and scientists ought to fill the seats of the history commission, some suggested that politicians and representatives of both ethnicities could also be included in the mix. Two core ideas emerged out of the focus group discussions: first, participants reflected on the possibility of a recent outcome that supports the genocide claim; and second, on the repercussions of such an outcome, including the payment of reparations.

Non-Armenian participants were generally of the view that if the history commission reached a conclusion that supported the genocide claim, they would simply disregard that conclusion. At the same time, these participants found such an outcome to be very unlikely. Thus, if the commission found that the events of 1915 were a genocide, then they would commit to fighting that claim. In any case, a large majority of participants declared that they would be uncomfortable with such an outcome, which would still not be powerful enough to change minds.

On the issue of reparations, non-Armenian participants voiced strong reactions. They claimed that if Turkey were to be made liable to pay reparations to Armenians, then all the assets that belonged to the Ottoman Empire and are currently outside the borders of modern Turkey would potentially be repatriated. The possibilities of paying reparations to Armenians or the state's handing back to Armenians their immovable properties were generally not well-received. Yet, most participants claimed they could be made to

understand and tolerate these outcomes. When asked if they would turn over their own assets as a result, they reacted quite strongly against the idea. The payment of reparations was, for most participants, a matter for the state to handle and that individuals ought not to become involved in such a process.

Armenian participants asserted that a history commission ought to include historians as well as 1915 survivors and witnesses. Some Armenian participants added that any third country with official records to support the fact-finding mission ought to provide access to their archives. While some supported the idea of forming an independent history commission, others argued that Turkey needs to play a key role if such a commission was to be set up. A few participants offered that the Patriarch or a nomination from the Patriarchate could be included in the commission to represent Armenians:

“It will bring together historians. People who have had first hand exposure to the events at the time. Witnesses could also be included. Russian historians could make their archives accessible. The French, the British ought to also provide access to their archives.” (Istanbul, female, 45, housewife)

“I think the commission should be set up by Turkey. Turkey ought to come out and tell everyone to make their archives accessible, encourage them to discuss issues openly and to confront those that place the blame on it.” (Istanbul, male, 48, professional in a private company)

“Armenians could be represented by the Patriarchate. The Patriarchate already has the names and contacts of everyone, one way or the other. The main source for Armenians would be an informed individual that the Patriarchate would nominate” (Istanbul, male, 42, shop owner)

Contrastingly, some participants asserted that recognising genocide is the first step forward and therefore, rejected the idea of setting up a history commission. Others commented that if Turkey were to back away from establishing a history commission, then that could be interpreted as an admission of guilt. Many doubted that a history commission could deliver a truly impartial conclusion. Non-Armenian participants stated that the Armenian lobby could attempt to influence the findings of the history commission to undermine Turkey:

“We do not need to be the first to propose establishing a commission. Isn't there a rule that suggests that one is innocent until proven guilty? They could arrive at non-binding conclusions all day. I don't think that we should even bother denying them. Perhaps they are now under some burden of responsibility because they recognised the Jewish genocide; but it should be noted that this country, that was founded, was financed by their money. I don't think that anything could happen to us unless we admit to guilt ourselves.” (Istanbul, male, 32, accountant)

“The Armenian lobby is quite powerful. I think that such a commission could only work if Turkey prepares the foundations really well. Armenia would immediately react by demanding that Turkey accept the Karabakh problem, 'ok, you accept this problem, sidestep Azerbaijan and I will stop chasing genocide'. That is why I don't support the

establishment of this commission. If it would be set up anyway, then we should prepare for it diligently.” (Istanbul, female, 45, house wife)

The return of immovable properties to minority foundations in Turkey was also discussed during the workshops and most of the responses were moderate:

“The return of minority foundations’ assets is positive; I feel, it indicates genuine concern and is nice. If it’s private property that will need to be returned to its previous owner, then there might be some problems. After all, we are talking about private property. Back then, it belonged to somebody, but now it belongs to someone else. Taking it from them would be wrong. That would mean forcing them out of their home, too.” (Istanbul, female, 21, university student)

Chapter 2: Analysis of In-depth Interviews

The in-depth interviews for this research were carried out between May 2015 and January 2016 in Istanbul and Ankara, with 26 interviewees of different professions and political leanings. They were asked about their thoughts on the recent debates on 1915, their understanding of the change in the official narrative on the Armenian question, their views on the 2014 and 2015 official messages of condolence, the relations between Armenia and Turkey, the closed border and the Armenian diaspora. They were also invited to offer their proposals for concrete steps which can be taken to address the problem.

2.1. In Retrospect: The History and Perceptions of Genocide

When analysed together with the findings of the focus group workshops, the responses given in this section of the qualitative interviews deliver crucial insights on the perceptions of genocide in Turkey. First, there are very clear differences of opinion on 1915. Those that would call the events of 1915 a genocide are in the minority, and are mostly Armenians. The majority squarely denied claims of genocide. Armenian citizens of Turkey that participated in the in-depth interviews consistently referred to the events of 1915 as a genocide, whereas non-Armenians, though open to discussing the events of 1915, were generally uncomfortable with using the term genocide to describe that cross-section of history.

The majority were inclined to accept the sheer size of traumas caused by the incidents of 1915 yet disinclined to go as far recognising the issue as genocide. Different terms were utilised to capture 1915 by interviewees. However, one term that particularly stood out was collateral damage. Some interviewees referred to ethnic cleansing, while others repeated the definitions often disseminated by the official historical narrative: deportation and forced migration. Very few interviewees claimed that although they would refuse to use the 'blackened' term of genocide, they would be willing to engage with the Armenian community in a renaming exercise.

Many commented that genocide is a legal term. One interviewee claimed that since genocide has a legal definition, the focus of the public debate on 1915 ought to be legal as well. If the events of 1915 were to be recognised as a genocide, the preconditions set by the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide must be met. Another interviewee that called 1915 an act of ethnic cleansing suggested that the public debate

hollowed out the concept of genocide (as a specific legal term) and that Armenians were voicing their sentimental demands via legal means:

"1915 could be recognised as an act of ethnic cleansing. However, the term genocide has been rendered meaningless through over utilisation. It has become an umbrella term. The second article of the 1948 Convention states a prerequisite for genocide recognition: intention to kill. Was there an objective to physically exterminate peoples? Were Armenians specifically killed because the aim was their annihilation? Well, I have my doubts. On the other hand, it is politically impossible for Turkey to recognise genocide, and it shouldn't, because Turkey simply cannot respond to compounding demands for reparations, land returns and recognition. We have, for years, been side tracked and need to get back on the main road."

A former bureaucrat claimed that he would define 1915 as a "forcible transfer of people". The same interviewee referred to the founding statute of the International Criminal Court announced in Rome at the UN Summit in 1998 and underlined that forced migration was a crime against humanity:

"1915 ought to be defined as a forcible transfer of people, which the Rome Statute recognises as a crime against humanity. 1915 is most definitely not genocide, if the Genocide Convention were to be considered. Though the Genocide Convention defines genocide; after the events in Bosnia, the terminology was more accurately set. Most central to the term is the intent to destroy and it must be proven. The intent is missing in the Armenian case. However, the result is annihilation; even to a genocidal degree in some cases. This disturbed the Ottoman ruling elite immensely at the time. Trials were held in 1915-17 and 67 perpetrators were sentenced to death. Clearly, serious crimes were committed. It seems apparent that the process of deportation was poorly managed."

A red thread in the discussion is that most interviewees believed the term genocide is utilised as a rhetorical weapon against Turkey. Almost all interviewees held that the West throws the word genocide around as a political trump card. That being said, the West hinders the emergence of a healthy and free public discussion around 1915. According to most interviewees, this issue is now a political battle.

One author declared his discomfort with the use of the term genocide for political ends, during our interview:

"1915 invokes the images of genocide. This term is also used as a weapon against Turkey. I would approach Armenians with an intention to apologise for what happened, however, I would also lament the Western position on this issue. Besides, the decisions taken in Western parliaments on this issue undermine our ability here to talk about and experience this painful past. The West instrumentalises this issue. The actual events of 1915 are mind-blowing and sad but I refuse to adopt the Western language on this issue. What happened was death, even when we call it deportation. I have known for years that what actually happened was beyond the official historical narrative. What concerns me the most is whether we could have killed so many people. This thought has an impact on how I associate with the society I live in. Follow that trail of thought and we would conclude that none of us is safe here. In some cities in Anatolia, half the population was wiped out. To

carry out such atrocities, one must have been blinded by a killer instinct. What happened also goes against the paradigm of faith in Turkey.”

Even though one participant claimed that accepting the events of 1915 as a genocide would not bother him, he expressed his discomfort with the West’s politicisation of this issue, particularly since he saw it using genocide as a political deterrent against Turkey.

“The history surrounding 1915 pains me. Incredible atrocities were recorded. That is also a time when humanity was at its cruellest state. I think the events in 1915 contributed significantly to that state. I could easily refer to 1915 as Armenians do, as the ‘Great Catastrophe’. We cannot deny what had happened. Not many people are informed about 1915 and that is because we have been uprooted from history. The terms genocide and massacre could also be appropriate references to 1915. However, one should also acknowledge the Western manipulation. The West is politicising this issue. Armenian accounts right before the Second World War of what had happened are plainer, simpler. They would talk of a great catastrophe, a massacre. Today, however, the West uses genocide as a term to club Turkey on the head.”

In the in-depth interviews, references were made to the concept of shared traumas, which was often referenced in recent public debates too. This point of view suggests that all tragedies and traumas of the declining Ottoman Empire ought to be bundled together and analysed. During the empire’s demise, everyone suffered, including Armenians, and that calls for a more holistic approach. Erdogan’s public statement on April 23, 2014, referred to this concept of shared traumas and according to some interviews, this heralded a paradigm shift in the state’s discourse. Additionally, when discussing the traumas that Armenians have had to endure, the participants advised not to forget the pain that people in the Balkans and the Caucasus have been through, too:

“I believe that finding a peaceful resolution to 1915 is imperative. On the path to building peace, memory plays a significant and meaningful role. However, in the public discussions there is a one-sidedness and intent to bash Turkey, which make me uncomfortable. If the main objective of a discussion on the Armenian question is to bully Turkey (which is the case right now) then it is difficult to reach a meaningful solution through debate. This offends Turkey’s society. The public psyche is ignored. Besides, when we talk about the Armenian question, we also ought to consider the traumas of the peoples of the Balkans and Caucasus. The debate, as is, cannot be acceptable for the wider society in Turkey because of its limited focus. I think that for all these reasons, the 1915 debate today is very politicised. Nobody denies how painful the past was for those who’ve had to endure it. Yet the demands for its acceptance today are not expressed in a way that is conducive to a peaceful resolution.”

An Armenian interviewee summarised the perspectives of the Armenian community on this issue with the following words:

“All Armenians refer to 1915 as genocide. Genocide is a politically charged term. However, when Armenians choose to use genocide they do not intend to create a pressure group against Turkey or to force genocide recognition.”

According to this view, the choice of the term genocide represents the Armenian community's intent to underline the humanitarian dimension of the history surrounding 1915. The interviewee we quoted above also suggested that though all Armenians outside of Turkey unanimously use genocide to describe 1915, there may be Armenians of Turkey that choose not to, namely for fear of persecution, pressure, and also possibly because they have not had the chance to study their own history:

"There is definitely a knowledge gap in the Armenian community in Turkey. Also, they are exposed to different types of narratives and teachings across their lives. What they learn at school and listen to in church and at home are contradictory. In fact, most Armenians in Turkey are familiarised with their own identity through their exposure to the wider society. This is still true, even though state suppression has waned and sources of information have multiplied."

Another Armenian interviewee expressed similar notions and reflected that Armenians of Turkey would not publicly use the word genocide for fear of persecution or being perceived as defiant:

"The Armenian community in Turkey testifies to genocide because the killings ensued even after 1915. Genocide refers not only to mass killings but also the forced transfer of people—who have lived their entire lives in the villages where they were born—from their homes. The main objective was to get rid of the non-Muslim population. When I was a child, I remember there being at least 120 thousand Armenian inhabitants in Istanbul. Now, our numbers are down to 50 thousand, or perhaps even lower."

Another Armenian interviewee supported the genocide claim wholeheartedly and quoted Raphael Lemkin, who first coined the term genocide based on his observations of the fate that has found the Armenian community in the Ottoman Empire. This interviewee also noted that the Ottoman officials that have taken part in the atrocities were later reprimanded and venerated by the state, which had also deeply offended Armenians:

"The founder of the term genocide, Lemkin, declared that his work was impacted by what had happened to the Armenians. As Hrant Dink said, even if Armenians at the time had been transferred to Syria on golden aeroplanes, it would still have been genocide. If 1 million people were wiped off, then that is genocide. Only women and a small number of children survived. The definition is quite clear and no one outside of Turkey has doubts about it anyway. It was a war crime and a shameful incident. Not to mention that the Ottoman officials responsible for the atrocities were exiled to Malta and upon their return to Turkey, promoted to key posts in public service. Their dignity was reinstated. People like Bahattin Şakir were murderers who were later rewarded by the state."

Armenian interviewees also shared their sense of unease with the West's attitudes and position towards the Armenian genocide. They claimed that the West was not being constructive at all and expressed this perception with statements such as "third countries are using Armenians", "we are being used as leverage", and "the decisions made in third country parliaments are not helping".

An apparent view shared during the focus group workshops was that the Armenian community's perceptions of 1915 were markedly different from those of the wider society; our interviews also

supported this finding. Generally, everyone agreed that a great deal of pain was experienced however, there is no consensus on how to label 1915.

2.2. Current Developments: Official Condolence Messages and Changing the Rhetoric on 1915

In the interviews, the recent developments in Turkey around 1915 were addressed, including the changes in the state narrative and the official condolence messages delivered in 2014-15 by politicians holding the highest political offices in the country.

With regards to 1915, a point on which all interviewees agreed upon was that the public discussion in Turkey feels more liberated and plural. In the past, any mention of genocide was criminalised, but today, that is no longer the case.

Furthermore, most interviewees observed that 1915 is a consensus-builder among members of Turkey's political elite since they could put aside their political differences while addressing the Armenian question:

"In Turkey's politics, there is a nationalist consensus around 1915. All political parties would act in unison when responding to negate genocide claims. Besides that, there is this constant search for reciprocity in Turkey with regards to 1915. Turkey's political elite believes that no solution other than genocide recognition could appease the other side."

Another point of unanimous agreement among the interviewees was that 1915 had been treated as a taboo for many years and remained unaddressed. In addition, since 1915 is not covered, in any detail, in history textbooks, there is a significant gap in the knowledge and awareness among Turkey's society. A former bureaucrat commented on this gap with the following remarks:

"The beginning of a public debate on 1915 is a very positive development. The state narrative on 1915 that was adopted under Ataturk's leadership was fit for the purpose then. However, after his passing, that narrative should have been replaced with a new historical discourse, during the 1950s. An intellectual impasse prevented this much-needed evolution in the official historical narrative. Thus, our confrontation with the Armenian question was delayed. Even during the 50th Anniversary of the Republic in 1965, Turkey was still non-responsive. The Armenian question emerged in the public psyche only when ASALA (Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia) struck. Governments spent decades in a state of hiatus. They didn't see the point of addressing the issue. Though the Ministry of Foreign Affairs rang the alarm bells, there was a bottleneck at the higher levels of government, and we were incapacitated by our own lack of knowledge."

The interviews also revealed that although there is presently a freer public platform to discuss the 'Armenian Question and 1915', there are still problems in the way the two communities perceive each other. Regardless, interviewees underlined the significance of change in the recent years:

"Considering the difficulties in the relationship between these two communities over the last 100 years, it would be unrealistic to expect a change in perceptions overnight."

We are now at a point when an apology and acknowledgement of the pain are called for. Yet, Turkey's society profoundly rejects being associated with acts of genocide. This rejection dates back to the days of the Committee of Union and Progress government. The progress made in the last decade around the collective memory is also crucial. The existence of Armenian members of parliament today is a great example of this progress. Then again, we did not experience the level of pain that the Armenians endured."

In all the interviews conducted, it is observed that the official condolence messages were well-received across the board and all interviewees commented that the delivery of such messages was long overdue. However, the Armenian interviewees especially voiced their expectations for a consistent political positioning, which would manifest in concrete steps, to follow these expressions of condolences. An academic we interviewed specifically underlined the notion that politics which are based only on rhetoric may not deliver the intended results:

"I do think that these condolence messages are crucial, however, these gestures ought to build on other steps taken as part of an overall strategy. I cannot see an overall strategy in place, though. Official messages channel whichever direction the political winds blow at the time of their delivery. If there is an element of political angst, for instance, then the tone of the official statements becomes more liberal."

The 2014 condolence message is applauded for its recognition of collective suffering. Most importantly, the message is believed to represent a key turning point towards normalizing the official narrative around 1915. Some interviewees commented that the Armenian community did not receive the message as well as this gesture deserved:

"The condolence message was very significant and unprecedented for Turkey. Sadly, the Armenian community failed to recognize that and ignored this gesture. The content of the message was placed under scrutiny as if the voicing of sympathy itself was a very normal step for Turkey. Instead, there should have been some acknowledgment that the political elite finally took an initiative to change the public mindset around a difficult issue. Adopting a narrative of sympathy was groundbreaking and challenged the taboos of statism, nationalism and secularism strongly held by the intelligence services, law enforcement and foreign policy bureaucrats. This is a key point to raise when communicating the significance of the condolence message to Armenians and to the world."

Some interviewees asserted that the 2014 condolence messages did not have as great an effect as was intended on Armenians of Turkey because of the weaker support it received from the intelligentsia in Turkey. Those who were of this opinion suggested that some sections of society gave a knee-jerk reaction to the condolence messages just because that Erdogan delivered it. An author we interviewed noted that the political polarisation in Turkey prevented people from coming around a 'joint platform for good.'

"The language and tone of the condolence messages were good. That could have been a great starting point, but the social actors that would need to step up to the plate and carry that conversation forward were too reluctant to move. They were reluctant because

of their hatred for Erdogan. Erdogan does not hold the reins to cultural power. The conservatives are absorbed in their own problems. There is no shared platform for good in Turkey. Therefore, it is very hard to appropriately position 1915 on the public agenda.”

Comparatively, interviewees predicted that a fear of the potential damage to the public psyche—which could be caused by the Armenian genocide centennial in 2015—triggered Davutoğlu to deliver another condolence message. Interviewees reckoned that the decision to schedule the Battle of Dardanelles’ commemoration on April 24 was a diplomatic manoeuvre prompted by the anxiety around the Armenian genocide centennial. A journalist we interviewed offered the following analysis:

“The statement of condolences delivered in 2014 was a step forward and contained some very powerful messages. Concrete policies need to follow this message. The aim there was to change the course of the public narrative. We could describe the 2015 message as a form of diplomatic confrontation. The Armenians were looking to turn the centennial into a massive campaign. Turkey responded by bringing up Dardanelles. These types of diplomatic manoeuvres won’t create a crisis, though. Both sides are playing politics. We could expect different steps to be taken in the 101st anniversary.”

From interviews with communities other than Armenians of Turkey, it is observed that they believed Turkey is driving the process of finding a resolution to the Armenian question. They interpreted the 2014-2015 condolence messages and the Battle of Dardanelles commemoration accordingly. Moreover, they underlined the need for the government to take political risks so as to further pursue the dialogue process. For that, the government would need to coordinate the process by using input from all departments of the state and expressing genuine and convincing interest. An expert on Turkey-Armenia relations shared his analysis of Turkey’s 1915 politics in the following words:

“The Turkish state is committed to gradually reaching a resolution on the Armenian question. Because it’s politically powerful, this government could goad public opinion towards a solution. However, the messages that Turkey transmits are confusing. There is no coherence. They are playing it safe. They don’t engage in public diplomacy. Official statements generally target an internal audience. Moving the commemoration of the Battle of Dardanelles to the 24th of April was a mistake. We hear contradictory statements about the issue, which suggests the lack of policy coherence. Different departments of the state sound like they are unaware of each other’s positions. Only so much can be achieved through a condolence message alone; Armenians will then ask what the end game is. The current situation breeds a sincerity problem.”

Armenians of Turkey also believed that progress had been made in this area and though some criticism was levelled against the official condolence messages, the interviewees were positive about the paradigm shift in Turkey. They claimed that they cared most about the government’s diligent pursuit of this process and would be very disappointed otherwise. Some cautioned that government actions ought not to be PR stunts and admitted that they were not so readily convinced:

“Of course, these messages are positive but I would ask, why now? This might seem like chasing a conspiracy theory but why did the government take this step? Is it Western pressure? Or were they prompted by the Armenian genocide centennial? I don’t know. It seems more like a PR exercise than anything else.”

To allay suspicions such as the one quoted above, there was an expectation from the government to deliver genuine policies that respond to Armenians’ social needs. An Armenian member of clergy told the following:

“In recent years, we have been treated as a counterpart by the state. There is definitely a paradigm shift. The EU accession process played an important role to facilitate the return of immovable properties to minority foundations. Our current parliament seats three Armenian MPs. The state is supporting Armenian schools (currently at 16). In addition, the genocide issue is not a taboo anymore. New books are published on the subject. The commemoration held in Taksim, Istanbul is another significant development. Clearly, the state wishes to record some progress in this area. Therefore, we should also remember not to come across as ungrateful.”

An Armenian journalist was also very positive in his tone and noted the marked difference between now and a past mired with hate speech and public pressure against Armenians. He added, however, that a point of complete normalisation has not yet been reached.

“There were some positive developments in the recent years. There was a time when ASALA was making headlines; Armenians were called ‘dogs’. Those of us who were born before the 1990s would remember that reference. Those days are behind us. However, even today, the media continues to use negative references. It is therefore very important that we now have a wide range of information sources, which together break down the hegemony of a singular discourse. We can now speak more loudly about the Armenian heritage in Turkey. There are, nevertheless, limitations to our liberty, even today. For instance, our places of worship are still registered as museums. Oh well, progress is progress.”

Another focal point of discussion was the return of immovable properties to religious minority foundations. This issue is as critical for Armenians as it is for other minorities in Turkey. An equally pertinent issue for Armenian foundations is to address the governance problems for religious minority communities in Turkey. We interviewed a representative of an Armenian foundation who shared the following insight:

“The Ottomans governed religious minority populations through their ‘millet’ system. During the progression into the Republican Era, this system collapsed. Religious institutions which represented minority communities were granted foundation status in 1939. However, most of their privileges, including a governance body integral to the management of their community—the Corporal Assembly (Cismani Meclisi)—were revoked by the junta regime in 1960. A joint body was set up to oversee the management of all foundations. That body was later shut down by the 1970 junta administration. Today, we face the dire need for a piece of legislation on minorities. The current framework for foundations is too limiting for religious minority communities. There is a mentality of a

sovereign nation in Turkey. I'm a judge so I know what I'm talking about when I say that this mentality is problematic and should be abandoned. The demands raised by the Armenian community are always perceived with suspicion. Because we are seen as the enemy, mistrust and anxiety are always existent in our bilateral relations."

Both through the focus group workshops and interviews, it is possible to notice a key set of problems that the Armenian community in Turkey needs to resolve. Apart from these problems, Armenians live alongside the wider public in fear and anxiety. The majority of Armenians were anxiously considering what one interviewee expressed in the following way: "it is difficult to turn back time and return to darker times, but if Turkey descends into chaos or into a regressive mode, then..." The strides made in debating 1915, the Armenian question publicly and the softening of relations invoked a level of comfort. However, to establish trust, further and more practical steps need to be taken.

2.3. Armenians of Turkey

One more vital issues discussed was the situation of Armenians in Turkey. Like the conclusions of the focus group workshops, the interview findings show that the majority of Turkey's society is oblivious to the difficulties that Armenians face. Some Turks we interviewed held that Armenian anxieties were unnecessary. They highlighted the positive steps taken more recently to engender a better environment for minorities:

"Around the world, minorities are experiencing more anxiety than before. This is the result of rising nationalism. A Turkish person in the United States also feels anxious and is subjected to racist slurs. Bearing that in mind, there really isn't any reason why Armenians in Turkey should feel especially anxious. It's an unnecessary disposition. In the last decade, Turkey has come a long way in protecting the rights of minorities. It bothers me that minorities are always perceived to have just cause and Turkey always to be considered in the wrong."

Armenians of Turkey held the polar opposite of the view expressed above. The interviews suggest that Armenians in Turkey consider themselves to be "stateless" and "out on their own." An Armenian journalist we interviewed claimed that Armenian communities living outside of Armenia share those feelings. Turkey is, nevertheless, a more challenging landscape for the Armenian community because their existence in the country is defined by a constant state of anxiety. Though softened down more recently, this sense of anxiety continues to pervade the psyche of the Armenian community:

"Armenians in Turkey are not in a position of power. Armenians with a healthy degree of consciousness acknowledge this. They recognise that their demands will never be met and they fear voicing those demands anyway. With the normalisation of relations, we could expect the community to experience a psychological release and to begin enjoying some influence. Therefore, Armenians of Turkey eagerly seek reaching a turning point towards normalisation. They are not only anxious, but also feel left out. They have a difficult relationship with the diaspora. From time to time, the Armenian diaspora could prefer that Armenians of Turkey remain under strenuous circumstances and for that reason, they are marginalised."

A member of clergy for the Armenian Church commented during interview that the current policy direction for minorities in Turkey is very favourable. However, he noted that the steps taken were insufficient, especially since the freedom of assembly for the Armenian community remained restricted. He saw the main reason for these restrictions to be the lack of trust shown to Armenians by the Turkish state. He added that the political will was sometimes insufficient to facilitate the reforms, as the resistance of one bureaucrat at a critical junction of the process could cause indefinite delays. His accounts of the problems that the Armenian community and the Patriarchate were experiencing were sobering:

"We are denied our freedom of assembly. Right now, we do not have any legal status and therefore, cannot own property, carry out events or accrue savings. Even the vehicles that the Patriarchate uses are registered under real persons. Today, there are 33 churches, and each one of them is established as a foundation. These foundations answer to the General Directorate of Foundations, not to the Patriarchate. An Armenian foundation could even sell its church and the Patriarchate would not have the authority to intervene. Without legal status, we are unable to generate an income through our assets. So, we have established a foundation, Hovagim 1461, on behalf of the Patriarchate, with the aim to start owning property."

The Armenian community wishes the Patriarchate could be fit for purpose and also for the development of its civilian wing. In that context, the interviewees emphasized the importance of reinstating the freedom of assembly. One interviewee specifically suggested that the policies pursued by the state wiped out the Greek community in Turkey and that he feared that Armenians stood to meet the same fate.

The anxiety and discrimination that Armenians face in Turkey and the sense that their rights to citizenship were contingent, came up as frequently during our in-depth interviews as they did during the focus group workshops. In one interview, an Armenian participant said:

"... we are still unwanted in this country. Neither the politicians nor the public want us here. If we were to suggest that we intend to leave, I bet the state would pay us to leave and even purchase our plane tickets."

Events such as Hrant Dink's assassination and the Samatya murders were quoted as reasons for Armenians' persistent sense of insecurity in Turkey. All Armenians wished to be treated as equal citizens by the state. The cessation of hate speech, the change in the current restrictive state of the Patriarchate and concrete steps taken by the state to correct the society's perceptions of Armenians, were all listed among the demands for a resolution of the Armenian question. However, they acknowledged that the deeply-rooted hatred against Armenians, which has sunk deep into the public space and psyche, would not vanish overnight.

Armenian and non-Armenian interviewees were clearly divided across their knowledge and opinions of the Armenian experience in Turkey. Whereas Armenians spoke of persistent and concentrated forms of discrimination directed towards their community and daily existence, Turkish interviewees believed that the discriminatory practices of the past were abandoned more recently. Some went as far as suggesting that minority rights are now prioritized over the rights of the Muslim majority.

2.4. Turkey-Armenia Relations

The diplomatic relationship that has long been deadlocked over a closed border between Armenia and Turkey was another pivotal point of discussion during our in-depth interviews. It might be recalled that Turkey was one of the first countries to recognise the Republic of Armenia when it was founded in 1991. As the two countries began negotiating the terms of their bilateral relations, a war broke out between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh and culminated in the closing of the Turkish-Armenian border in 1993. Eventually, a ceasefire agreement was signed in 1994 between the two warring countries; nevertheless, a sustainable peace has yet to be installed. Hence, Turkey's border to Armenia remains closed.

In the interviews, non-Armenian participants concurred with the direction of Turkey's policy vis-à-vis Azerbaijan and Armenia. They were motivated by their perceived connection and kinship to Azerbaijan and also, by their assumption that Azerbaijan trumps Armenia in terms of strategic importance to Turkey. Furthermore, the participants noted that Azerbaijan has invested considerably in Turkey and is thus, an indispensable ally.

By extension, interviews show that diplomatic relations with Armenia are perceived as a function of Turkey's strong relationship with Azerbaijan. One of the academics we spoke with, elaborated on Turkey's Azerbaijan-focused policy position:

"Azerbaijan is more important to us than Armenia. Besides, we already know what bad relations with Armenia mean. On the other hand, we have not experienced how poor relations with Azerbaijan could affect us. This indicates that a delicate balance was struck and will continue to prevail. In Turkey-Azerbaijan relations, Turkey does not hold the reigns."

On the issue of the closed Turkey-Armenia border, most interviewees focused on the potential psychological impact on Turkey's public opinion than the real economic impact of the closed border. Accordingly, they floated around the truism, "economic relations with Azerbaijan cannot be risked for a better relationship with Armenia." In addition, a majority of the interviewees perceived that normalisation of Turkey-Armenia relations was not to be expected.

Other interviewees claimed that Armenia, through the Hocalı massacre and its continued siege of Azerbaijani territories, offended Azerbaijan and hence, justified Turkey's support to Azerbaijan:

"The Azerbaijani issue is a hot topic. Armenians are to blame there. We have to choose to side with Azerbaijan. Above all else, if we consider the Hocalı massacre, then Turkey must acknowledge Azerbaijan's suffering and pursue an Azerbaijan-focused foreign policy. Also, if Turkey were to switch sides and support Armenia, then it would undermine its self-interest and displease everyone. Turkey, therefore, has to make some political calculations and act accordingly. Indeed, Turkey does want to improve its relations with Armenia, but in doing so, it must always consider Azerbaijan. Since the geographical location of both countries cannot be altered on the world map, we also need to build dialogue with Armenia."

As was the case in focus group workshops, the interviews demonstrated that Turkey's relationship with Azerbaijan is believed to be too precious to salvage for the sake of better relations with Armenia. Not all interviewees opposed opening the Turkish-Armenian border, however, everyone cautioned against excluding Azerbaijan from any policy decision in that particular direction. Most interviewees alluded to the impact that Turkey-Azerbaijan relations have on public opinion:

"We need to acknowledge Azerbaijan's significance here. [Turkey's relationship with] Azerbaijan is not simply a rhetorical barrier to build peaceful neighbourly relations with Armenia. We are connected [to Azerbaijan] through our energy interests and social cohesiveness. Considering both countries' importance to Turkey, in terms of realpolitik, there is no doubt that Azerbaijan would always prevail. Azerbaijan is also able to mobilise Turkish public opinion quite effectively."

"Opening the border with Armenia would not damage Turkey; on the contrary, I would expect this move to increase Turkey's international prestige. However, this decision could not be taken without considering Azerbaijan. Turkey needs to build up its diplomatic strength vis-à-vis Azerbaijan. Once Turkey is able to develop sufficient political muscle to 'defend its position against Azerbaijan', then we could expect the normalisation of relations between Armenia and Turkey."

Armenia's increasing dependence on Russia and its worsening relations with the European Union and the West, in general, were touched upon during our interviews. Most interviewees conveyed their discomfort with Armenia's position as Russia's outpost. They also interpreted the persistence of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in terms of Russian influence on Armenia.

On the other hand, the Armenians stressed the importance of normalisation between Turkey and Armenia and suggested that cordial neighbourly relations would support their sense of safety and belonging in Turkey.

"... I am even willing to let the genocide issue go. To feel like a proper citizen in Turkey, I really need Turkey's relationship with Armenia to mend."

The Armenians in Turkey expected the normalisation of cross-border relations between Armenia and Turkey to help break down some of the prejudices against the Armenian community in Turkey, too.

"With the border opening, we could expect the feeling of anxiety among Armenians in Turkey to wane. The average Turkish citizen would revisit his or her own prejudices against Armenians. Diplomatic cooperation across the border would positively impact daily life in both countries too. Increased contact could easily alter the course of community relations."

The Armenian interviewees noted the positive developments in bilateral exchange between civil society organisations in Turkey and Armenia, however, they underlined that civil society efforts could never replace high-level political dialogue between states.

“Civilian relations cannot and should not be considered as a replacement for political relations. We place a disproportionately great value on cross-border civilian initiatives and disregard the significance of normalisation between states.”

Armenian participants who touched on the role of the Armenian diaspora at this point of the conversation reflected that they did not expect the Armenian diaspora to support the normalization of Armenia-Turkey relations however they also noted that the diaspora position should not be an obstacle.

Through the interviews, it was also possible to understand the perceptions around the proposal to set up a history commission to study 1915. One historian interviewed claimed that although history could not be altered, attempts to better understand it were useful. He maintained that Turkey had adopted a more liberal approach towards historical discovery. However, the Armenians approached the issue more rigidly, as their identities have seemingly been constructed with strong references to genocide.

“The diaspora identity is a product of the genocide trauma. As this issue has become a type of worship for Armenians, I cannot see it being openly debated. Turkey did not undergo a process of constructing an identity based on hating Armenians, so it could adopt a more liberal stance. It’s important to fully understand history so that we do not forget that Turkey is not in complete denial.”

Another interviewee criticised how the current debate on 1915 is being driven by politicians instead of historians and suggested that only a discussion between subject-matter experts could deliver a healthy and credible outcome. The same interviewee asserted that a debate among historians and experts would not yield the conclusion of genocide:

“The history commission idea is very realistic and appropriate. Turkey could make its archives available. I don’t expect the content in the archives to support the genocide claim. Politicians who lack subject-matter expertise should no longer discuss this issue. They only try to impose a political discourse on the public debate. If the issue is dealt with by historians, then the outcome would not support the genocide claim.”

2.5. Future Expectations and Proposals

During the interviews, opinions on the paths to a resolution of the Armenian question and the barriers to and expectations of a solution to the public rift over 1915 were sought. The findings from the discussions with interviewees on these sub-themes echo the findings from other sub-themes: the two communities have contrasting perceptions and thoughts. The first critical difference lies in how Armenian interviewees focused on the solutions for concrete and contemporary problems, whereas non-Armenian interviewees focus on broader and more politically determined solutions.

The second major difference revolved around 1915: for Armenians, 1915 was central to their everyday lives in Turkey; while for non-Armenians, 1915 was a political issue, far removed from their daily existence. A heightened sense of expectation for a resolution is observed in the interviews with Armenians, whereas found this sense absent in the conversations with non-

Armenians. The majority of non-Armenian interviewees did not seek out a resolution to this issue. Armenian interviewees linked the significance of an open border between Turkey and Armenia to a hopeful future, where they would feel less anxious and more positive.

They also underscored the dire need for the two communities to recognise and communicate with each other. Though Turks and Armenians have lived alongside one another for centuries, their mutual perceptions are skewed. One Armenian interviewee reminded that the word Armenian is still considered derogatory in the Turkish heartland and suggested that Armenians and Turks needed to construct a common language that demanded the opening of the border between Armenia and Turkey:

“Armenia and Turkey need to build a common language. No one has the right to confine both communities across the border to a deadlocked relationship.”

With regards to the closed border, some interviewees focused on the issue of cultural heritage. The return of immovable properties to minority foundations and the restoration of religious sites carried incredible weight in shaping the public psyche on the closed border issue. Secondly, the Armenian interviewees demanded the recognition of their cultural presence in Anatolia in ways that would restore their dignity as peoples of the land.

One Armenian interviewee summarized the demands of his community in the following points:

- “1. The acceptance that people were uprooted from their homeland, deported and killed;*
- 2. The public announcement of crimes committed by Bahattin Şakir, Cemal Paşa and Enver Paşa, and their denigration. An official condemnation of the perpetrators of genocide;*
- 3. It would be important for these two steps to be called for by the Turkish society as well as the Armenian community. These moves ought not to be prompted by the Americans or the West.”*

The non-Armenian interviewees were all of the opinion that accepting 1915 as genocide is unlikely. A journalist interviewed claimed that it was impossible for him to recognise the events of 1915 as a genocide, both as a media professional and as a human being:

“A history commission could be set up, research could be conducted and if, as a result, Turkey emerges as the sole perpetrator of these crimes, then that would be fair enough. I do find that highly unlikely though. We should remember those who were deported and killed in masses, east of the Black Sea. The Armenians collaborated with the Russians to forcibly remove peoples, to put it lightly. The deportation policies need to be considered alongside the attack on the coalition, orchestrated by the Armenians and Russians. But if genocide is proven, then by all means [I will accept it]”.

At the same time, interviewees rallied in support of a free platform for public debate, to be facilitated by politicians. They argued that politicians needed to accommodate all views, including those supporting and opposing genocide claims. To change the negative public opinion towards Armenians, a deeper understanding of a common history needed to be constructed, according to the interviewees. Most of them referred to the roles that the media and education ought to play, as social institutions. A journalist interviewed suggested that Turkey

needs to take measures that are highly representative and pluralistic, and that in doing so, the state needed to stand side-by-side with the Armenians:

“The return of immovable properties to minority foundations was a critical step forward and more steps need to be taken in the same direction. Forming a commission to investigate the facts is also quite urgent, in my opinion. Steps need to be taken to improve citizenship, social rights, return of confiscated properties to their rightful owners and to facilitate Armenians’ return to Turkey. As the state implements these future steps, it should stand side-by-side with the Armenians. It should commission lawyers, if necessary, and facilitate procedures.”

Another interviewee underlined how through the above-mentioned steps and normalisation of the discourse, both communities needed to understand that “they do not pose threats to one another”, and also, to push the scope of the debate away from morality and conscience, and towards pragmatic policy steps, so as to include the state more closely in the conversation. The debate, according to this interviewee, bore a moral and legal significance. To break the chain of the two sides engaging in monologues, the debate needed to be taken to a more legitimate ground.

According to an academic, it is very challenging for Turkey to resolve the issue around 1915 but it tries its best. The interviewee said that Armenians had failed to reciprocate Turkey’s efforts with constructive steps, and thereby, discouraged Turkey. More constructive responses from Armenians would inevitably deliver more progress. In addition, this interviewee noted that Turkey could officially apologise for the lives lost and improve the living conditions for its own Armenian community, irrespective of the debate surrounding 1915.

“It’s impossible to achieve a resolution to the 1915 issue. Turkey would continue with business as usual since there are no legal implications. Moreover, a public debate on 1915 would not yield any results. Turkey’s delivery of official condolence messages two years in a row is positive. Nevertheless, Turkey could easily work towards improving the lives of its Armenian community and that could be addressed independently of any resolution on 1915.”

Other interviewees also brought up the issue of Turkey’s apology. Some argued that an apology would imply a form of recognition and outright rejected the idea. Others noted that while it would be impossible for Turkey to recognise genocide, sharing condolences publicly or commissioning a memorial could be considered.

One broad conclusion from the interviews is that 1915 needs to be addressed as a key issue for Turkey to resolve, without interference from third party governments and through commissioning concrete steps towards a resolution. It is also observed that the Armenian question should not be confined to a debate around 1915. Instead, it is best tackled as part of the domestic agenda towards democratisation.

Conclusion

Etyen Mahçupyan

The Ottoman Empire skilfully domiciled many sectarian and ethnic communities, without any common cultural or legal threat, under one roof. In the absence of a formal public space to convene, religious communities adopted the practice of addressing the Ottoman state directly to communicate their issues and demands. With the demise of the empire and the emergence of the modern state of Turkey, all religious communities lost their legal status. However, it was only the Turkish/Muslim community that was considered to form the core of the new nation. That is because citizenship was defined along ethnic lines and Islam was nominated as the qualifier of ethnicity in that definition.

During this process, the new nation-state disregarded the Armenian community as a formal counterpart. Thus, Armenians were neither accepted as equal citizens nor able to conceive themselves as such. Another critical problem was that the Armenians' relationship with the Muslim community was extremely limited. Apart from personal connections and the limited transfer of knowledge between two communities via those connections, Armenians and Muslims did not possess formal and functioning channels to exchange information and become acquainted with one another. Moreover, the state did not endeavour to narrow this communication gap; on the contrary, its policies of discrimination served to deepen the divide between the two communities.

Invariably, equal citizenship was not the only contentious issue between Armenians and Muslims. The Armenian community, which comprised nearly 15 to 20% of the Anatolian population at the beginning of the 20th Century, significantly shrunk due to forced military service and deportations in 1915. Subsequently, a similar strategic trajectory was adopted by the Republican administration following the demise of the Ottoman Empire. On the other hand, the Republic of Armenia—which was founded on Turkey's eastern border—joined the Soviet bloc and throughout decades, engaged in an armed conflict with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh territory.

Consequently, what is conceived today as the Armenian question roughly has three pillars: the discussion around the events of 1915 and genocide; the issue of basic rights and liberties, voiced through calls for equal citizenship; and the cross-border conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which gradually escalated to diplomatic and military tensions between Armenia and Turkey.

The fieldwork on this report, which consists of focus group workshops and in-depth interviews, reminds us that though each of these three pillars has a unique set of complex relationships

and perceptions, they all emerge from the same foundation. This foundation reflects the shared drama of two communities that have lived side-by-side for thousands of years and yet, remain unaware, and even ignorant, of one another's anxieties and expectations.

The first observation in this report is that the reciprocated ignorance and lack of acknowledgement of each other's presence led these two communities to adopt protectionist and defensive attitudes towards one another. Their differences in interpreting history and perceiving the present also came into the mix. As a result, the two communities perceived one another with suspicion and believe that the 'real' intentions of their adversary are much more 'dangerous' than the apparent ones.

Secondly, this report finds that the Turkish participants had not reached a consensus on how they perceive the Armenian question, on which there was too wide a spectrum of opinions and frankly, not enough interest and depth to the public debate. By extension, the stance taken on the Armenian question on behalf of the Turks was too shallow and failed to go beyond rhetoric. Therefore, we face an entangled disarray of ambiguous and poorly expressed ideas. This shows how the state narrative on the Armenian question has failed to align everyone along a single version of events. It should be noted, however, that the state narrative did succeed to inspire a shared perception of threat to Turkey.

In contrast, the Armenian participants were much more aligned in their views across almost all issues discussed. One reason for this alignment is surely the comparatively small size of the Armenian community in Turkey. However, as a community with similar family histories and shared accounts of difficulties—which have persisted across generations—it was not surprising that Armenians have developed a more common understanding. When processed within the confines of a closely-knit, religious environment, this common understanding yielded very strong and precise forms of judgment. In the minds of Armenians, these issues seemingly existed in very specific, angular and confident forms.

Against this background, we observe a clear divide across the three areas this report address, namely, history, citizenship and foreign policy.

History is an emotionally-charged issue for both communities. Nevertheless, while Armenians traced their keen interest in contemporary history across specific events, Turks chose to remain uninterested in historical developments and to relate to history on an abstract and ideological level. Accordingly, deportation and genocide represented a historical landmark for Armenians, whereas for Turks, the same terms represented an ideologically-motivated claim. Armenians expected the usage of the term genocide as the bare minimum for a process of coming to terms with the past. Turks, on the other hand, believed that referring to genocide would be conceding to the maximum—because of the threat that admitting to genocide poses to their own notions of self. Hence, Armenians' basic instincts were to mention and remember genocide, whereas Turks primarily sought to forget and to help others forget too.

Every time Turks faced an impasse, they resorted to the official historical narrative to claim that Armenians were the real perpetrators. The attempts to dodge the actual question included statements as varied as blaming Armenians for treason, asserting that the killings were justified, denying intent, suggesting that the wartime conditions killed everyone, without exceptions,

and finally claiming innocence by refusing to associate with genocidal urges. Comparatively, after considering the multifaceted and complex structure of their daily existence, Armenians seemed to have softened their resolve to single out genocide recognition as the leading issue, and thus, opened channels for dialogue. For instance, **some Armenian participants' statements on how Muslim families sheltered Armenian children showed promise towards engaging both communities in an exercise to formulate history together.**

The discussions around citizenship showed that the Armenian participants felt disenfranchised. An abstract notion of equality did not translate into practice, particularly when systematic and established forms of discrimination continued to persist. They believed that they were viewed as foreigners or guests in their country and accordingly, feared the state. At the same time, the Armenian participants thought that Turks held a secret grudge against them. The prohibition on Armenians holding higher public office was an obvious manifestation of this concept.

The statements from the Turkish respondents to this research confirmed the Armenians' perceptions. A large majority of Turkish respondents declared their discomfort with the possibility of Armenians serving in the higher echelons of public office or political representation. This demonstrates that the notion of equal citizenship is still not established in the minds of Turks. Moreover, it is an indication that Turks struggle to understand the anxieties of Armenians without feeling obligated to exercise empathy. Commerce, however, was one area that was exempted from such notions. On the contrary, business relationships between the two communities reflected the direct opposite. **As a way of moving forward, a potential direction of policy-making could be to appoint Armenians as public servants in the trade and economy sectors.**

The third area, foreign policy, is completely dominated by the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. Both sides approached this issue more calmly and shared more realistic observations. Unlike their stance on history, Turks focused on specific and concrete issues when addressing foreign policy. As opposed to discussing the distinct challenges of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the participants underlined the importance of Turkey's own interests in maintaining strong relations with Azerbaijan.

It is not surprising to find that the Armenian participants approached the foreign policy elements of the discussion from a point of sympathy for and association with Armenia. Nevertheless, their statements did not indicate a strong nationalist connection with Armenia. They only expressed their concern for the implications of the current foreign policy on Armenia's present and future welfare. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was not immediately relevant for Armenians of Turkey and they viewed it as a tertiary issue. Since both sides adopted a pragmatic approach, it might be possible to push the foreign policy dimension of the 'Armenian Question' out of the deadlocked state which hinders progress on the two other dimensions. Research from both countries also supports this finding. Therefore, **any Turkey-led technical or micro projects that bring Armenia and Azerbaijan together could potentially foster peace in the region.**

Armenian and Turkish communities were not just divided along thematic lines but also in terms of their reactions to recent developments. The partial return of immovable properties to their rightful owners—minority foundations in Turkey—under the AK Party administration were received positively, yet greater strides were expected. The condolence messages announced by the AK Party administration two years in a row were even more problematic because they directly

related to the genocide issue. Armenians may have considered these messages to be valuable but they were also convinced that such messages, delivered by senior political leadership, were hypocritical. As long as genocide was not recognised, expressing condolences fell short of communicating genuine sentiments.

Turks, on the other hand, expressed contradicting emotions in response to the official condolence messages. The moral element captured in these messages was appealing, however, expressing condolences was also viewed as admitting to guilt and therefore, deemed risky. That both sides did not assign a great value to these messages and yet found them to be positive is promising and provides some leverage to the government. Moving forward, the government could aim to broaden the scope of its initial outreach, which was already well-received by both communities. For instance, **removing discriminatory content from textbooks—to introduce a more pluralist discourse that facilitates the comparison between different narratives—could inevitably amplify the impact of any future messages and render future expressions of condolences more genuine.**

The discussions around establishing a 'history commission'—which could materialise in the future but features prominently in the public opinion presently—also represented the distinct perspectives of the two communities. On the surface, both communities positively approached the idea but expressed divergent opinions when discussing the specifics. To Armenians, setting up a history commission could be beneficial, as it could encourage a public debate around genocide. Therefore, it could facilitate a wider dissemination of information and potentially change public perceptions.

Contrastingly, Turks expressed anxiety about a history commission, as they believed that establishing such a body could be interpreted as an admission to the historical ambiguity around 1915 and hence, precipitate the recognition of genocide. At the same time, backing away from establishing a historical commission could be seen as a sign of fear and an indication of guilt. The Turkish participants did not seem ready to digest the findings of a historical commission, either. Some research participants indicated that they would not accept a genocide verdict, while others claimed they would be ideologically opposed to paying reparations. If a history commission leads to a wider rift between the two communities, then it will not have served the 'Armenian Question' well. Accordingly, **Turkey will need to construct a commission that seats open-minded subject-matter experts who advocate the idea of critical historical research, to allay the fears of Turks and gradually pave the way for reconciliation.**

Beyond all points of divergence and disagreement, Turks and Armenians shared many viewpoints. These common perceptions could present the government with valuable opportunities to come to terms with the gap, mend the fault lines in communication and help end the regional bilateral conflict. Firstly, **both communities agreed** on the following conclusion: under the AK Party administration, **fewer cases of discrimination were recorded and a freer and more diversified platform of public debate emerged.** Undoubtedly, there has been progress for the better.

Secondly, **both the condolence messages and the proposal to set up a history commission were broadly viewed as positive initiatives.** However, since Armenians interpreted these initiatives as minor developments, whereas Turks saw them as significant changes, the

government will need to carefully plan its strategy and gradually deepen its focus as it continues to support these two areas, using a different set of resources.

Third, opening the Turkish-Armenian border conditionally and fostering the development of commercial and social relations received support from both communities.

Fourth, both Armenian and Turkish participants equally reacted to **the intervention of third countries and the West in areas of contention for both communities**. This shared perception invites the government to act with greater flexibility, to search for cooperation channels and pursue these paths without feeling threatened.

Finally, both communities communicated **how disheartened they were about a future resolution**. They had very little faith in resolving the issue or achieving a normalisation of relations. Thus, fostering the belief that the normalisation of relations is possible and generating a shared sense of hope alone would go a long way towards achieving a solution.

The relationship between Armenians and Turks is defined by a sense of insecurity on one side and a set of anxieties on the other. If this situation persists, then it would be unrealistic to expect any form of intervention to deliver lasting and genuine results. **Turkey has to communicate a holistic message to both sides, and structure its contents in a pragmatic way that equally responds to Armenians' insecurity and Turks' anxieties**. A genuine and decisive move in this direction could energise both communities to reconsider the past, present and future of their relationship with each other and moreover, to explore pathways of mutual recognition and understanding. In this way, many political issues that seem deadlocked today, could accordingly be addressed and resolved effectively.



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