

An Interview with Baskin Oran

“That much ignorance is only possible with education.”

By Khatchig Mouradian

On May 30, long-time human rights activist in Turkey Prof. Baskin Oran received an email from the Turkish Revenge Brigade, a group responsible for the assassination of a prominent human rights activist in 1998. The email included a death threat and swear words aimed at Oran and the Armenians. The text was similar to the one Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink received before he was killed last year on January 19 in Istanbul.

Worried that this interview, conducted in May, could cause more problems for Oran in Turkey, I decided to postpone its publication and shelve the transcript indefinitely. I sent it to Oran, however, with a note explaining my reluctance to publish it. These are my words, he said, and they will not change because of threats.

Baskin Oran is a regular contributor to Dink's newspaper, *Agos*, and to *Radikal* in Turkey. Unlike Dink, he does not use the term “genocide” when referring to the massacres of the Armenians during World War I. Yet, Oran is far from being a “genocide denier” and is an outspoken critic of the Turkish state's denial of the suffering of the Armenians. He also believes that Armenian Genocide resolutions in countries like the U.S. make the job of Turkish democrats more difficult when it comes to educating the Turkish public about 1915.

Khatchig Mouradian *When talking about taboos in Turkish society, you often quote Sakalli Celal (Celal the Bearded), who said, “That much ignorance is only possible with education.” Talk about how education has promoted ignorance.*

Baskin Oran Any nation-state is created mainly by using two instruments: compulsory military service and national education. During this education, you are constantly taught this or that and you come to believe in it because it's very heavy indoctrination. Teaching something does not only mean teaching something, it also means *not* teaching something. And this is the case in Turkey with the 1915 massacres.

I heard about 1915 for the first time in the U.S., when I was 18, from a friend of mine called Bob Harabedjian. He was a very funny guy. We were both in different cars, we stopped at the red light. We were high school students. He said, jokingly, “You dirty Turk, you killed my grandparents.” I said, “F*** off, bastard” and we continued our way. Of course I forgot the incident the very same day. This was in 1964. Afterwards, we came to hear about it in 1973, when the ASALA killings started. It was like being awakened at 4 o'clock in the morning not by a radio alarm clock, but by a bomb under the bed. We immediately said, “What the hell are they doing, these murderers?” This did not lead us to study what happened in 1915. On the contrary, we only felt a very strong reaction vis-à-vis the killing of totally innocent people, the diplomats.



L to R: Journalist (and current editor of *Agos*) Etyen Mahcupyan, Baskin Oran and Hrant Dink in the garden of the Ecclesia (Greek church), Gumusluk, Bodrum, Feb. 2006.



L to R: Hrant Dink and his wife, Rakesh; Oran's wife, Feyhan; Etyen Mahcupyan and Baskin Oran in Bodrum, Feb. 2006.

Later, and especially after Turkey's candidacy became official in 1999, we started reading publications by Taner Akcam and some members of the Armenian diaspora, and we came to learn that a lot had happened in 1915–16.

But with the passing of time, the word “genocide” was so frequently pronounced that two parallel alleys developed among us: the first was learning about what happened in 1915 and the second was reacting to the word “genocide.” Because for the Armenian, “genocide” means one thing: 1915. But for the Turk, “genocide” means one thing also: 1933–45. That simply means that Turks felt the Armenians were telling them, “Your grandfather was a Nazi.”

On the other hand, a wing of the diaspora was (and is) trying to obstruct Turkey's candidacy to the EU. This was (and is) totally unacceptable for us Turkish democrats because this candidacy was (and is) the very occasion that had permitted us to learn things that were concealed from us until then. The laws called “EU Harmonization Packages” enacted between 2001–04 have been a benediction for democracy in Turkey, and they were made possible thanks to seeing a light at the other end of the tunnel. By this I mean membership in about 15 years.

To sum up, this is a very typical case of dialectics: The diaspora has taught us, the Turkish democrats, what our “grandfathers” have done, and by the same token the diaspora has prevented (and is preventing) us passing it on to our people. People block their ears when they hear the “g-word.” I personally have no objection to the horrors of 1915 being called “crimes against humanity,” for instance. But this word is definitely counterproductive in Turkey.

The diaspora ended its terrorist tactics when the Orly bombing caused apprehension in the Western world and started the “Armenian bills.” Very cleverly so. But in this particular case, the diaspora was not able to change that endless tape of “It was genocide” and replace it with more sophisticated discourse, so it prevents us from teaching our people the facts.

Well, what about understanding the Armenian state of mind also, you would say. Don't worry about it; we know how it is because we read about it and we learned about it from Armenians of Turkey like Hrant. We know why this word is sacrosanct. It's because the Armenians were not able to mourn

their dead freely so this is the only way to get satisfaction. They will never be able to get rid of a sentiment of revenge as long as the Turkish state continues denying the facts. I don't know about the other parts of the world but in the Middle East, mourning your dead openly is the only way you can get it out of your system. This is a sheer fact.

But let us not forget what Hrant, the most important student of Turkish-Armenian relations, had said: “Both Turks and Armenians are sick; the former because of paranoia, the latter because of trauma.” The Muslims destroyed the Armenians (and civilization in Anatolia as well) and now deny everything. This makes the Armenians sick. And the Armenians are right now playing an endless tape, and that makes the Turks sick.

K.M. *Talk about the Armenian issue in the context of the wider problem of “silences” in Turkey.*

B.O. The Turkish state and the Ottoman state have never looked for rational solutions to major problems: from 1915 on, the Armenian massacres; from 1924 on, the Islam issue; from 1925 on, the Kurdish issue; since the 1950's, the Cyprus issue. We Turks have a habit of stuffing those dead bodies in the closet, as the French say, or sweeping them under the carpet, as the Turks say. And of course there, they rotted and started to stink. Now, they are coming out of the closet all at once, mainly because we are trying to enter the EU and we have to face all those issues one by one, without which we cannot claim that we are Europeans. But we are scared to death. At least three zombies are chasing us.

This is one of the things that the EU and the Armenian side should be able to comprehend. In the Armenian mind, there is one issue only; but in the Turkish mind, there are several problematic issues that need to be resolved. And they are linked to each other. Once you decide to solve a problem, you have to open your mind, and once you open your mind, all things will enter.

This is, of course, our fault. We never solved anything. But if Armenians, EU people, etc. don't comprehend this, all sides will continue to suffer for a long time and for nothing. Now, if the hawkish wing of the diaspora prefers to lengthen the suffering for reasons of its own, which is understandable, it's an option of course. But I doubt it's the good one.

K.M. *Talk about Turkey's relations with Armenia. On several occasions, you have talked about a missed opportunity in 2000.*

B.O. At the end of 2000, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the most rational state structure in Turkey because it's the most Westernized, proposed a plan to start to solve the Armenian problem in three initial stages: 1) The border trade with Armenia would be encouraged. Harbor facilities (Trabzon, probably) and other economic benefits would be provided to alleviate Armenia's economic hardship in order to diminish the influence of hardliners; 2) A process would be set in motion to discuss the Armenian massacres within an academic framework; 3) The problems of the Armenian minority in Turkey would be addressed.

Behind this was the thought of normalizing life in Armenia and therefore getting Armenians ready to have normal relations with Turkey. And this way the pressure on Turkey would ease.

Nationalism is the ideology of bad times. If you are enduring hardship, you become a nationalist. It's like an analgesic. Therefore, now both sides feel pressured, and if they have better economic relations both will be better off. People are leaving Kars just as they are leaving Armenia. So why not open the border, enabling Armenia to get cheaper goods and Kars producers to make money. This is a win-win situation. But Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit killed the proposal, saying, “Let us first ask Azerbaijan.” Of course, you can guess what Azerbaijan answered, and the proposal was killed. Now that Azerbaijani oil is flowing to Mersin it's even more difficult economically.

I personally am of the opinion that any solution will start by a normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia. But there are obstacles to it. I'll just name them but will not dwell on them: 1) public opinion in Turkey; 2) Azerbaijan; 3) the Armenian diaspora.

If anyone is expecting Turkey to abide by the wishes of the Armenians at a clack of their fingers, this will not happen. It must go in stages.

K.M. *Talk about the road leading to 1915.*

B.O. Turks should learn about what happened in 1915 and accept the facts. On the other hand, as 1915 did not start



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in 1915, Armenians should learn more about the period from the 1850's on.

In the mid-1850's, the Muslim Circassians were driven out of Christian Russia upon the defeat of Sheikh Shamil. In a miserable way they took refuge in the Ottoman Empire. The easiest way for them to feed themselves was to pillage people who had something and who were not protected, and these were the Armenians of eastern Anatolia, who also happened to be Christian.

Almost at the same era, the Kurds started doing the same. The Kurdish tribal leaders had revolted (1806–43) against the centralizing policies of the Tanzimat and were beaten at the end. The last and most powerful of them, Bedirhan Bey, was exiled to Crete. Then, the Kurds lost their tribal hierarchy and, as a consequence, started to cut the hen that laid golden eggs instead of continuing to do what they have been doing for centuries: collect the golden eggs once a year, meaning collect the yearly “protection money” from the Armenians who were much wealthier and much weaker than the Muslims for a variety of reasons.

Under the pressure of the emigrated Circassians and the Kurds, the Armenians made their grievances known to Istanbul—to the Armenian Patriarchate and the Amira (the Armenian bourgeoisie and nobles who were in very good terms with the administration), and to the sultan. Neither of them cared. The Patriarchate would care only after Khrimian, from Sivaz, became Patriarch (and this is why the Armenian question is also the product of a class struggle). The sultan would have cared, but he was in an even worse situation than the Patriarch. He could not possibly give the Kurds, fellow Muslims, the impression that he was protecting the non-Muslims against the Muslims, especially because the Muslims of the empire were already very hysterical about the egalitarian discourse of Tanzimat. Also, the Western powers had happily started using the grievances of the eastern Anatolian Armenians to interfere with the domestic affairs of the empire: The famous “Eastern Question” became nothing but the “Armenian Question.”

In this mess, the Armenian petty bourgeois youth, already imbued with nationalist and also narodnik/anarchist ideology in places like Saint Petersburg, Paris, Geneva, etc., found that the only way of surviving was to set up revolutionary bands and parties, and attack Muslim villages. This further provoked both the Muslims of eastern Anatolia and the sultan. Whether or not they intended to, the Armenian revolutionaries perfectly reminded the administration in Istanbul of the “Bulgarian Model,” i.e., the tactics of setting up armed clashes to attract the attention of the Great Powers, and to obtain autonomy first and independence later.

Therefore, just as there is more than one zombie for Turkey now, there was more than one specter for the Ottoman Empire: the Russians in the East (called Moskof, despised and feared); and the Western powers (each one of which wanted to get the lion's share from an empire destined to dismember one day or the other). Not counting the economic problems, of course.

Under these circumstances, Abdulhamid, a master of balance, thought he

could find a solution by founding in 1890 the Hamidiye Regiments to kill four birds with one stone: to suppress Armenian upheavals; render happy Muslims alienated by Tanzimat; breed rivalry between the Kurds (only Sunni and selected tribes were admitted); and also deprive the Great Powers of any excuses for intervention.

Then the real plight of the Armenians started in eastern Anatolia. Until then, the massacres were sporadic and local in nature, and also mutual, although asymmetrical. When the regiments were started, the killing was institutionalized.

The state kills when there's an armed rising. But the Ottoman state was harsher when it came to the non-Muslims—especially if they were conceived as being an “instrument” of the outside Christian powers. I must remind you that the latter used the “Eastern Question” and then forgot all about the Armenians in the Treaty of Lausanne.

Everything was made even worse when the CUP entered the scene, adding its Turkist and even Touranist ideology to these fears. Several things were working together to annihilate the Armenians, starting with the panic prevalent in the minds of the CUP officials. As the result of the Balkan War of 1912 especially, the empire had shrunk to a mere Anatolia and “now the Armenians are selling it to the Russians,” though the CUP officials.

To sum up: 1915 was a disgrace to humanity. But it did not start in 1915. The period 1839–1915 must be studied as a whole. The Turks are avoiding 1915, and the Armenians are avoiding the period leading to it. Nothing should be avoided.

K. M. *For decades, you have been at the forefront of the struggle for human rights and democracy in Turkey, against all odds. What kept and keeps you going?*

B. O. My conscience, of course. Well, also my expertise on nationalism and minorities.

But this does not mean that I was born like that from my mother. On the contrary, I was very much under the influence of Turkish nationalism (Sakalli Celal!) well until the 80's, although I became a leftist while studying at Mulkiye (Faculty of Political Science). In 1982, I think, I first started working on the Turks of W. Thrace, Greece. This minority enjoyed protection under Article 45 of the Lausanne Treaty, which said that the rights given to non-Muslims in Turkey (Articles 37 to 43) would also apply to Muslims in Greece. Would you believe that at that time I was not aware of the situation of non-Muslims in Turkey? That's how I came to learn slowly about the non-Muslims and the Kurds.

Now, for me and my democrat friends the circle of the “oppressed and excluded” is even larger. We were able to put this into action during our “Common Independent Left Candidate” campaign at the parliamentary elections of July 2007. There we said at least three things unheard of before. We said, “When the left became known in Turkey in the beginning of the 60's, it spoke only for the proletariat, the working class. In the 70's, we hesitantly added a second oppressed and excluded element (despite ourselves, because we were staunch Kemal-

ists): the Kurds. But after the 80's, new categories of oppressed and excluded peoples came into being, or came to our attention: the Alevi, the non-Muslims, the Roma, the homosexuals... Now, to be able to say that we are leftist, we have to be the spokespeople for all these oppressed and excluded categories.”

We also said the following, which, to my mind, was even more original: “So far, all these excluded and oppressed people defended their kind only. Now they have to defend not themselves but each other. This is the only way they can save themselves from being excluded and oppressed: The socialist will defend the Kurd, the Kurd the Armenian, the Armenian the homosexual, the homosexual the Alevi, the Alevi the Roma, etc.” I must remind you that this approach was very much in line with Hrant's approach.

The third thing we said during the campaign (and it brings me to my point): “We also call upon people who are not oppressed and excluded, but who have a conscience.” That's where the conscience comes in.

I am a white Turk. A Turk does not mean an ethnic Turk in Turkey. It means a Muslim Turk (because the Millet system, which was legally abolished in 1839, is still prevalent in the minds of all Muslims). A Turkish WASP needs even more qualifications to be a *maqbul* Turk, that is to say a Turk that is well trusted and liked by the establishment. This Turk has to be *Hanefi* (and not *Shafi*—most Kurds are *Shafi*); has to be Sunni (against Alevi); Muslim (against non-Muslim); and Turk (against those who do not say they are Turks). On top of all these qualifications, you also have to be a secularist.

I am a white Turk, but with a conscience. All those who have a clean conscience should act like this. I gain nothing from being an advocate of human and minority rights in Turkey. All I get is trouble. I was kicked out of the civil service four times during two military coups. The first time was in 1971, and I came back in a year or so on court order. At the end of 1982, I was kicked out three times and each time I came back with a court order. Now, I am having security cameras and barbed wire installed to my home. But if I don't speak and write as I do now, how can I sleep? How can I look in the mirror? How can I face my wife? It's as simple as that, [while] defending Armenian rights in the U.S. or France is a piece of cake!

K. M. *You mentioned the court. How do you feel about the courts in Turkey today?*

B. O. It's all upside-down now. People show their real face or stance in times of hardship and fear. The judiciary in Turkey feels threatened. That was not the case during the coup in 1971. And once the effect of the 1980 coup passed, they were instrumental in bringing people like me back to their work—applying the laws, nothing else. Now they feel threatened by all the zombies. In Turkish we have a saying, “If the salt stinks, then there's nothing to do.” Now the judiciary is the salt. When people like me were kicked out of their jobs, the judiciary was the last resort. Now the judiciary applies to me Articles 216 and 301/2 because I wrote a report entitled

“Minority and Cultural Rights,” a report required by Article 5 of the bylaws of the Consultative Council on Human Rights attached to the prime ministry. We just took our job seriously.

What I'll say is that accusation under Article 301/2 (denigrating the judiciary) is funny (I wrote very extensively about it all in the Regent Journal of International Law), but 216 is unbelievable. This article was promulgated among the EU Harmonization Packages in order to stop hate speech against the disadvantaged... and they applied it to me (“dissemination of hatred and grudge among people”).

Maybe you have noticed that there is a great resemblance between the conditions in 1914 and 2008 in Turkey from the point of view of perceived fear. The subjects of the fear are of course very different, but the strong perception is the same: Zombies will eat us. Zombies of “Islamism,” “Kurdism,” and “genocide” nowadays.

In a way, all this fuss is to trying to substitute for the fear caused by communism, which unfortunately is no longer there. But this is not “because of education” only (Sakalli Celal again). People on the street also strongly feel very insecure as a result of the deep economic, social, and political change in the country.

Turkey is undergoing the second modernizing revolution of its history. The first one, under the name of Kemalism, had happened in the 1920's. It permitted a transition from a semi-feudal empire to a modern nation-state, from community to nation, from the subject of the sultan to the citizen of the republic. Now Turkey is in the difficult process of completing this metamorphosis: Making a pass from the monist nation-state, assimilator, and/or discriminator by definition, to a democratic state; from an ethnically and religiously-defined nation to the concept of citizenship defined by free choice of the individual; from the citizen who was “compulsory” because the state denied his infra-identity, to a citizen whose infra identity is recognized and respected by the state. This is happening thanks to the hope related to the Turkish candidacy to the EU.

The most interesting thing in all of this is the radical change of the position of the actors: The revolution from above of Kemalists had met a religious reaction from Islam in the 20's. Now the second revolution meets the nationalist reaction of the Kemalists under the name of Sevres Paranoia. This paranoia, I already spoke about it, is mainly characterized by Islamic, Kurdish, genocide discourse. The CHP (People's Republic Party) and the Turkish army are the spokespersons behind it.

Therefore, the second revolution is more difficult than the first one because the Kemalists, victors of a liberation war, had no organized opponents against them in an autocratic setting. But today the sons of the then-revolutionary Kemalists are trying hard to keep all things like they were in 1930.

But thanks to the emerging civil society that did not exist before, the second revolution has a lot of chances. Against some odds, of course: Some unbelievable mistakes of the Islamists, terror of the PKK, and the endless tape of a wing of the diaspora.