Notes from a Funeral

A Letter from Istanbul

Henri J. Barkey

This past winter, on January 23, I attended the funeral of the slain Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in Istanbul. Dink was an extraordinary individual, a courageous campaigner for the right of free expression in Turkey, as well as both a proud Armenian and a proud Turkish national. Dink fell victim to a surge of xenophobic Turkish nationalism, itself the result of a creeping panic caused by the war in Iraq, an ideologically fossilized and unresponsive state apparatus, and politicians and a media quick to blame everything on foreigners broadly—all *too* broadly—defined. His murder and the resulting debate over its causes and consequences typify all the fissures, insecurities and contradictions of contemporary Turkey.

I had never met Hrant Dink and, truth to tell, I felt terribly guilty standing there, just a few feet away from his casket in the church, when so many with a stronger claim to propinquity were still clamoring to get inside. A mere academic interloper born in Turkey but long since a citizen of the United States, I had managed entry into the church thanks to some journalist friends who maneuvered me through the security lines. Yet my sense of guilt was soon overwhelmed by an odd mix of awe and sadness. I was awed by the sight of Armenians, Muslims and Jews, Turks and foreigners, young and old, united in a moment of grief. More than 100,000 people had walked that brisk morning in the streets of Istanbul in solidarity with Turkey's Armenian community, in solidarity with all Turks devoted to free expression, in solidarity with everyone, everywhere, affirming the spirit of what it is to be human. These are not common events in today's Istanbul.

Awe, however, was brushed dull by the sadness in the eyes of ordinary Armenian parishioners who had come to say farewell to a hero. That sadness reflected not just the murder of a man, but the death of an era. Turkey long enjoyed a period of cohabitation and coexistence in a genuinely multicultural environment, a legacy of a proud multicultural history and a confidence in the future. For Armenians in Turkey, that social environment now seems a kind of relic. Theirs was a precarious existence to begin with, for Turkey's Armenian population has been steadily dwindling: It stands at 50,000 at last estimate, down from two million on the eve of World War I. Meanwhile, growing sentiment around the world to push Turkey to come to terms with its past—specifically with the mass murder of Armenians in late Ottoman times during World War I—has further isolated the Armenian community within Turkey's newly unsettled political culture.

Hrant Dink had not been afraid to challenge the official Turkish line on Armenian issues. He had been prosecuted under Article 301 of the criminal code, a macabre construction that allows the state to go after anyone for insulting "Turkishness"—*Türklüğü*—a term that truly qualifies as "Orwellian" Turkish. Dink was found guilty. His prosecution, murder and most post-assassination press discussions of both are symptomatic of the growing unease of the Turkish elite with minorities and minority

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Protesting the assassination of Hrant Dink

issues. They may not be able to define "Turkishness" in so many words, but they are sure they know what it feels like.

This new unease with minorities, however, is a symptom of a larger discomfort. Many Turks are wallowing in fear and self-doubt, suspecting anybody and everybody—indeed, the world at large—of ganging up on them. So it was no particular surprise when the 100,000 marchers at Hrant Dink's funeral were assailed by columnists and some party leaders for "diminishing the value of Turkishness." Some criticized European reactions of sympathy and outrage over Dink's murder by wrongly claiming that Europeans fail to demonstrate similar feelings of human solidarity when Turks are the victims of racial hatred—in Germany, for example. They somehow managed to forget that Dink was first and foremost a Turkish citizen.

Dink's murder was highly symbolic and so required an equally symbolic reaction from state officials. It didn't happen. Not one senior Turkish official was present at the funeral. The Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and his deputy, Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül, stayed away for fear of offending Turkish nationalists whose votes they need in upcoming parliamentary elections. The President of the Republic, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, who had refused to congratulate Turkey's first Nobel Prize winner, novelist Orhan Pamuk, on the grounds that he had publicly acknowledged that Ottoman Turkey had killed a million Armenians, also failed to show up.

However miniscule a community they may be (non-Muslims in Turkey represent less than one half of one percent of the 72 million-strong population), most Turks view the non-Muslim religious minorities in their midst, many of whom have inhabited regions of Anatolia for centuries, if not millennia, as foreign. Ironic, is it not, that a country that wants to be considered "not foreign" in the eyes of the European Union labels non-Muslims in its own midst thus, even though the ancestors of many of these "foreigners" lived on present-day Turkish soil *before* the migration of Turkish tribes from the east.

The Turkish fear of minorities does not stop with tiny religious ones. It is the Kurds who keep most Turkish decision-makers, especially the civil-military elite, up at night. As the Kurds increasingly agitate for cultural and even national rights in Turkey, more and more are

being arrested or charged, often just for verbal slights to official dogma. Some Kurdish activists in Turkey do their people no favors by deliberately employing a discourse designed to infuriate the Turkish majority, but the fact remains that speech itself is increasingly being punished once again. Ahmet Türk, the leader of the pro-Kurdish party, was sentenced to six months in jail for referring to the imprisoned PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) leader Abdullah Öcalan as "honorable" (*sayın*), a quite common attribution in Turkish.

Turkish fear of its Kurdish minority extends to Iraq. Turks are utterly and unconditionally opposed to Kurdish independence in any form, anywhere. This is an odd view for a country that supports the independence of some 180,000 Turkish Cypriots in northern Cyprus, but refuses to contemplate Kurdish independence for a considerably larger number of people in the event this becomes the only viable option for Iraqi Kurds. President Sezer has refused to invite his Iraqi counterpart to Ankara because Jalal Talabani, who receives full honors everywhere else, happens to be a Kurd. Meanwhile, the Turkish Chief of Staff, Yaşar Büyükanıt, blocked the one serious attempt by the Turkish government to establish a dialogue with Iraqi Kurds by refusing publicly to sanction talks with anyone supporting the anti-Turkish PKK insurgents with arms—though there is no evidence that any Iraqi group, let alone the Iraqi government, does so. The U.S. State Department, too, has said as much.

On the other hand, Masoud Barzani, the leader of the Kurdish region in northern Iraq, does not help when he often uses language even more inflammatory than Kurds use inside Turkey. Every time Barzani opens his mouth, the Turkish press and an assortment of political hardliners are spun into a frenzy of overcompensating xenophobia, the effect of which is to undermine any hope of political reform in Turkey. Barzani did it again in early April, claiming that the Kurds would resist any Turkish interference in Kirkuk and threatening to interfere in Turkish domestic matters in retaliation. This prompted the Turkish Foreign Minister to call Secretary of State Rice to complain.

Even more ominous than Turkish hysteria over goings-on in Iraqi Kurdistan is the slow emergence of a systematic attempt at silencing domestic critics—not Armenians or Kurds, but Turks. Things have gotten sufficiently dangerous that Orhan Pamuk has felt obliged to leave the country; he now lives in New York and returns only for unannounced brief trips. The security services have assigned bodyguards to many other intellectuals.

At some level, the rising intimidation of domestic critics is sanctioned by officials, and not necessarily elected ones. A few months ago a weekly magazine, *Nokta*, revealed that the Turkish Armed Forces has a rating system for newspapers and journalists based on their opposition to the military's interference in politics. Permission to cover the operations of the Turkish General Staff is apparently based on how well journalists and their editors do on this points system.

To some extent, Turkish insecurities can be traced back to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Having chosen the losing side in World War I, the "sick man of Europe", as the Empire was then known beyond it borders, found its territories carved up by the victorious powers. The 1920 Sèvres Treaty, imposed by the victorious allies on the Ottomans, was undoubtedly harsh, though no harsher than those the Ottomans had imposed on others in their long heyday.

Turks, however, are not taught about that. They are taught about the Sèvres Treaty, thanks to an intense state-directed process of political socialization process that starts in primary schools. Though Sèvres was heroically undone by Mustafa Kemal—by Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey—the memory of that humiliation still haunts every Turk, and every Turk is raised to see ulterior motives in the policies of all great powers, Western powers not least among them. In his farewell address at the military academies this April, President Sezer warned the officers of the sinister plots by "domestic and foreign forces" to install a moderate Islamic regime in Turkey because of the need to transform Turkey into a model country for the Middle East. This canard that the West is looking to alter the Turkish regime has now become an undisputed fact among Ankara's cognoscenti.

It is therefore not at all surprising that most Turks perceive U.S. policy in Iraq as motivated in part by a desire to create an independent Kurd-

ish state, even one that will ultimately claim and come to include parts of Turkey. Of late, Turks have looked at the non-binding resolution in Congress on the Armenian genocide, which they vociferously deny having ever committed, as another example of typical injurious U.S. policy initiatives directed against their country.

Nothing better describes the current mood than the comments of the Deputy Chief of the Turkish General Staff, Ergun Saygun, when in a meeting in Washington in early March he compared Orhan Pamuk to a Turkish politician named Doğu Perinçek. Perinçek, who was fined by a Swiss court this past March for denying the Armenian genocide, has traveled all over the Turkish political spectrum. He was once a Maoist as well as a PKK sympathizer before assuming his current arch-leftist and arch-nationalist posture. His only contribution to Turkish political discourse over the years has been a litany of bizarre and inflammatory conspiracy theories, which suggests that Perinçek missed his true calling as a fantasy novelist. Nonetheless, Saygun said in Washington, "Perinçek gets persecuted because he claimed Armenian claims were wrong, whereas Pamuk is rewarded with the Nobel Prize in literature because he once said that a million Armenians had been killed in Turkey." In sum, Saygun denied Pamuk's talent and contribution to both world and Turkish literature, all for the purpose of defending a political provocateur whose grip on sanity is open to question. In the American context, Saygun's comparison would resemble a senior U.S. military officer comparing Saul Bellow with Lyndon LaRouche.

Nonetheless, General Saygun's intemperate comments are widely applauded in Turkey, standing as testimony to the country's present psychological fragility. Saygun's remarks abroad and many others like them at home feed a siege mentality that only makes matters worse on the democratization front. Yes, of course, Turkey is a democracy, but not an untroubled one. Turkish democracy is not yet fully institutionalized, even 57 years after its first free elections. The country is still debating the contours of acceptable political behavior, and the still faint smell of yet another military *coup d'état*—it would be the Republic's fifth, depending on how one counts "hard" and "soft" coups—is in the air.

The military, however, is not only or even

Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan under Atatürk's watchful gaze

mainly to blame for democracy's lingering frailty in Turkey. Most Turkish civilian political leaders have yet to internalize the rules and modalities of a genuine democratic polity. As in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Thailand and elsewhere, civilian leaders with but faint fidelity to democracy have often been responsible for evoking the fear in well-intentioned soldiers that democracy itself is at risk.

The Turkish case is particularly piquant, however, for the Turkish military views itself not only as the vanguard of modernity, but thinks it owns the modernization process because one of its own, Atatürk himself, started and championed it. It doesn't take much imagination to guess at how the Turkish military now recoils at the potential end result of its eight decades of effort: that a Muslim-based political party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP, for the Turkish Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi), might simultaneously dominate the most important institutions of the state—the presidency and the prime ministry. When the AKP nominated Gül as its candidate for the presidency in late April, the military issued a rambling and somewhat incoherent memorandum on its website about the threats to secularism. The memorandum, issued in the

midnight hours on a Friday, was interpreted as a message that Gül was unacceptable. The Constitutional Court was simultaneously considering a challenge to the election process by the main opposition party. The court, one of the bastions of secularist thinking, was already inclined to vote against the AKP and effectively annul the elections. The military statement closed the deal. As a result, Parliament has been disbanded and new elections will be held on July 22.

Army leaders are not the only ones who have been concerned, if one can judge by estimated one million demonstrators who rallied in Izmir on April 13 against Erdoğan's presidential prospects. Nonetheless, despite some of their more arcane ideas, the folks of the Justice and Development Party have probably done more to democratize the Turkish polity and push back the boundaries on all kinds of civil liberty restrictions than any political force in Turkey since the time of Turgut Özal.

Many observers inside and outsite Turkey do not trust AKP leaders, suspecting that the party's moderation is a means of biding time until it can inflict its religious edicts upon the country with impunity. Even if such suspicions are not entirely baseless, they are improbable. Turkish Islam is notably bereft of fanatical precursors, and what may well be traditionalist might only appear radical in Turkey's avowedly secular public space. Moreover, a Turkish Islamic movement, though lacking devotion for democracy on principle, may be a far better shepherd of tolerance, pragmatism and effective multiculturalism in Turkey than a secular, nationalist, Atatürkist military establishment that, though committed to procedural democracy, remains in thrall to an ethno-tribal definition of national identity.

How all of Turkey's contradictions and fears will play out during and after a season of pivotal elections is anybody's guess. In any event, the United States is not a disinterested bystander in the process. It is Turkey's most significant ally and has a deep interest in seeing that Turkey and Turkish democracy succeed. That is why Washington has been adamant that Ankara get a fair chance at joining the EU. This has been a very successful policy so far; the Europeans have opened the door to the Turks, and Turkey has enacted an impressive series of reforms to earn a seat at the table. Many Turks understand that Washington's role in all this has not been inconsequential, and that has helped to offset some of the fears and disappointments swirling around the Iraq war.

By the same token, it sometimes seems that what the Executive Branch giveth, the Legislative Branch would taketh away. The "Armenian Genocide Resolution" has arisen almost every session in Congress as of late, and every session the White House and the State Department manage to explain successfully the gratuitous disaster the bill's passage would cause. This allows various Congressmen to appease their Armenian constituents without actually having to do the deed. This year, however, is different: The Democrats control Congress, the White House is weak, and the Turkish "optic" in Washington these days is about as hard on the eye as it has been in many decades.

Truth be told, when politicians decide to rule on history, they unleash passions far more damaging than the collective wisdom of historians. Besides, a political body that declares one thing one day can turn around and state the opposite another day. If Congress does not again relent on the genocide resolution, it will lower the ramparts for the likes of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, who will no doubt take further liberties with historical truths.

Before his murder, Hrant Dink was deeply worried that the congressional resolution on the Armenian genocide would pass. He understood the folly of politicians getting involved in the history business. More important, he knew that the passage of such a resolution would end up helping the worst anti-democratic and xenophobic elements in the country. He used to argue that he would prefer to live in a democratic Turkey that did not recognize an Armenian genocide than live in an authoritarian Turkey that did. For the time being it appears as if sagacity has prevailed and Congress has decided to postpone a decision on the resolution at least until after the upcoming Turkish elections. In the meantime, it is equally important that Congress and the Administration focus on the worrisome xenophobia and extreme nationalism developing in Turkey. Hrant Dink's assassination was just one of its expanding manifestations.