

# CONFERENCE 1

## CONFERENCE ON OTTOMAN ARMENIANS DURING THE DECLINE OF THE EMPIRE: ISSUES OF SCIENTIFIC RESPONSIBILITY AND DEMOCRACY

(23-25 September 2005, Boğaziçi /Bilgi University)

As a matter of fact, the Boğaziçi University Conference was one of the most controversial conferences ever held in Turkey. Indeed, it was first organized at Boğaziçi University; however, the university administration suspended its controversial project to stage in late May a conference titled “Ottoman Armenians during the Decline of the Empire: Issues of Scientific Responsibility and Democracy”. The decision was taken after the justice minister spoke out against the plan. The would-be organizers of the conference postponed it though there was no legal requirement for doing so. That incident triggered criticism especially from the EU member countries and related organizations.

Towards the end of August<sup>1</sup> it was announced that the planned conference would take place on 23-25 September with the same program and the same list of participants and that Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül would open the conference with a speech. According to one news report PM Erdoğan had actually asked Prof. Soysal, the president of the Boğaziçi University, to revive the project to ensure that the conference would take place prior to Oct. 3, that is, the starting date of the Turkey-EU negotiations<sup>2</sup>.

The news that the conference was going to materialize triggered some reactions the strongest of which came from the Turkish Retired Officers’ Association, the Turkish War Veterans’ Association, the Turkish Noncommissioned Officers’ Association, the Turkish Association of the War Wounded, Martyrs and Their Widows and Orphans, and the Turkish Union of Nongovernmental Organizations. These organizations wanted their representatives to be allowed to follow the conference. But, one of the organizers, Prof. Halil Berktaş, told them that due to the limited capacity of the hall only the invitees would be admitted<sup>3</sup>. A bigger

1 Hürriyet, Aug. 23, 2005, Milliyet, the same date

2 Milliyet, Aug. 25, 2005

3 Zaman, Sept. 14, 2005

hall could have been found for a conference that was drawing so much interest from the public opinion. The organizers obviously had no shortage of resources. Meanwhile, some 50 academics issued a communiqué in which they said that only those scholars that subscribed to a specific viewpoint had been invited to the conference while those that held the opposite view were not permitted to attend and present papers. They stressed that they found this stance to be contrary to the “university” concept in essence. They pointed out that one-sided views were going to be presented to the public opinion and. They compared that to “Spanish Inquisition”. They said that the outcome of the conference would fall short of qualifying as a product of scientific impartiality<sup>4</sup>.

Having received a complaint from the Union of Jurists, Istanbul’s Fourth Administrative Court decided a temporary suspension of the conference, the Bilgi and Sabancı Universities, telling them to clarify in writing in 30 days a number of issues. The court decision was taken by a majority vote. The dissenting judge said that the court decision concerned a matter that could not possibly be brought before an administrative court as a case since it did not constitute an administrative procedure, adding that, in line with Article 15/1 of the Administrative Trial Procedures Law, the court should have rejected the case without even examining it<sup>5</sup>.

Objections to the decision of Istanbul’s Fourth Administrative Court came from all quarters<sup>6</sup>. PM Erdoğan said that in a democratic Turkey it was not possible for him to accept such a decision. He said that one might not like a particular idea but the expression of it could not be prevented by that kind of obstacle. He added that he did not think it was compatible with democracy and freedom<sup>7</sup>. Deputy PM, Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül said that “No one could surpass us when it comes to doing harm to ourselves.”<sup>8</sup> In a written statement the Higher Education Board (YÖK) stressed that one had to comply with the decisions of the courts, then went on to say that the injunction was an attempt to stretch the limits of the powers of the judiciary, and that it constituted an intervention in the academic autonomy of the universities safeguarded by Article 130 of the Constitution<sup>9</sup>.

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4 Milliyet, Sept. 22, 2005

5 Milliyet, Sept. 23, 2005

6 Istanbul Regional Administrative Court overruled that decision of Istanbul’s Fourth Administrative Court on Sept. 26, 2005 (Milliyet, Oct. 14, 2005)

7 Bianet, Sept. 23, 2005

8 Hürriyet, Sept. 23, 2005

9 Radikal, Sept. 23, 2005

A statement issued by the EU Commission, meanwhile, expressed profound regret over “this new attempt that prevents the Turkish society from discussing its history”, saying that the decision, taken just before the start of the conference, meant another provocation, considering the timing and the conditions, and that the Commission would refer to that subject in the Turkey Report to be issued on Nov. 9<sup>10</sup>.

The Conference Preparation Committee issued a statement, saying that the court had stepped outside its jurisdiction to intervene in the academic realm in a serious manner, that the universal rules of freedom of expression had been violated as well as the constitutional provisions that arranged these rules. It said that it deemed it necessary from the standpoint of democracy, academic freedom and autonomy that the conference should be held with priority. It announced that a decision was taken to hold the conference at Bilgi University<sup>11</sup>. Justice Minister Cemil Çiçek said that would cause no problem for the Bilgi University. He pointed out that the court had taken a decision against only the two universities organizing the conference, and that the meeting could well be held somewhere else<sup>12</sup>. Although the Union of Jurists that had opened the case described that as a ruse, a way of getting around the law<sup>13</sup>, the conference did begin at Bilgi University on the morning of Sept. 24. Some 300 people gathered near the campus, protesting the conference.

Since he was attending the UN General Assembly meeting in New York, Deputy PM, Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül could not attend the conference. However, he sent a message.

As we have mentioned above, those who did not have invitation cards were not admitted into the conference hall. And, of those who did have invitation cards, only two could attempt to voice the counter-argument during the conference. Fatma Sarıkaya, a member of the USA-based Turkish Forum, was in the hall as the representative of a nongovernmental organization. However, she was not permitted to take the floor. She tried to intervene from time to time, posing questions<sup>14</sup>. Also, Prof. Dr. İlhan Çuhadaroğlu, the former dean of the Faculty of Dentistry of the Marmara University, was driven out of the hall before he could

10 AFP, Sept. 23, 2005

11 Bianet, Sept. 23, 2005

12 Hurriyetim, Sept. 23, 2005

13 Hurriyetim, Sept. 24, 2005

14 CNNTURK, Sept. 24, 2005

complete his speech<sup>15</sup>.

The conference triggered an intense debate in Turkey on freedom of expression. President Ahmet Necdet Sezer said that it would be contrary to academic tradition to argue that there is only one unchanging truth on historical and social issues. He stressed that those who had opposing views had an inalienable right to express them; and denying that right would reflect a dogmatic approach rather than a scholarly one<sup>16</sup>.

In the wake of the conference, due to a number of developments debates continued in Turkey and abroad on the scope of the freedom of expression in Turkey. A case had been opened against writer Orhan Pamuk after he declared, “On this soil one million Armenians and 30,000 Kurds have been killed,” and he faced a three-year prison sentence<sup>17</sup>; meanwhile, Hrant Dink, a journalist of Armenian origin, received a –suspended—six-month prison sentence for having said, “The clean blood that would fill the place to be vacated by the poisonous blood that would spill out of the Turk, exists in the noble vein the Armenian would form with Armenia<sup>18</sup>. EU Commissioner for Enlargement Olli Rehn visited Orhan Pamuk in Istanbul after winding up his official talks in Ankara<sup>19</sup>, revealing the prevailing tendency in the EU circles.

The discussions taking place in Turkey on the scope of the freedom of expression pushed into the background the Armenian problem, which was the main topic of the conference. Furthermore, with a few exceptions, it was not clear who had said what during the conference and which ideas exactly had been discussed with priority. Although some of the newspapers and TV channels covered the conference they contented themselves with reporting on the incidents triggered by the dissenters’ attempts to speak. Only a few of the participants published, either prior to or following the conference, the papers they presented to the conference. However, these appeared in relatively small newspapers. No communiqué was issued at the end of the conference and that added to the uncertainties surrounding it. The organizers said the papers would be published but they did not set any date for that. The publication of the papers presented to scholarly conferences usually takes a long time, sometimes years. The Boğaziçi/Bilgi Uni-

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15 Zaman, Sept. 25, 2005

16 Milliyet, Oct. 4, 2005

17 Zaman, Oct. 10, 2005

18 Radikal, Oct. 10, 2005

19 The Oct. 8, 2005 issues of the main newspapers

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iversity conference was not a “normal” or ordinary conference in that it has been widely discussed by the public and, as we mentioned above, brought the freedom of expression in Turkey issue into the foreground. Therefore, it should have been a moral duty for the organizers to inform the public opinion as soon as possible if not immediately. They could have fulfilled that duty by permitting a TV channel to broadcast the conference live or by promptly feeding the papers into an Internet site. Unfortunately, this has not been done.

The major shortcoming of the conference was that it left out those views held by a great majority of the Turkish scholars, namely, the relocation of the Armenians was not genocide. When scholars who have the opposing views applied to take part in the conference their request was turned down. Another shortcoming was that the organizers handpicked the audience as well. Those who have the opposing views were not admitted into the hall. As a result, during the conference basically only one kind of opinion was expressed with certain nuances. Yet, as the President of the Republic has said, “Universities have to be institutions where different and conflicting views are freely discussed rather than places where dogmas are defended.”<sup>20</sup>

What is the reason for this attitude witnessed mostly in totalitarian regimes, especially in the former Communist countries? The Diaspora Armenians believe that acceptance on the part of the Turkish public opinion of the Armenian genocide allegations is the prerequisite of the fulfillment of their demands which can be summed up as obtaining compensation and land from Turkey. A very large part of the Turkish public sees these allegations as the biggest insult ever made to them and to their forefathers, and, therefore, no Turkish government could possibly say an “Armenian genocide” had occurred no matter how much pressure would be put on it. In other words, there is no hope that the Armenian demands would be fulfilled. Faced with this deadlock the Diaspora Armenians thought they would be better off if they took another path. They would convince the Turkish public that the relocation of the Armenians had been genocide and, using the pressure the Turkish public would then put on the Turkish Government, they would force the Turkish Government to acknowledge the “genocide” some time in the future. The path taken for that purpose entailed, as a first step, formation of a group consisting of a number of Turkish scholars who believed that Armenians had been subjected to genocide in Turkey. That group would defend the Armenian views. For that purpose, in recent years a number of Turkish scholars

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<sup>20</sup> Milliyet, Oct. 4, 2005

that came to be known as “genocidists” held various meetings in foreign countries with the participation of their foreign colleagues, some of them Armenian. In the wake of these meetings, the Turkish scholars in question began to express in their writings --with certain differences and to the extent that the Turkish laws permitted it in at that time—the idea that the 1915 relocation was genocide. The number of Turkish scholars of this kind grew in a short time. It turned out that most of them had been investigated (and, in some cases, were convicted and imprisoned) in the past for their leftwing extremist stances or actions and that they had performed a U-turn after the collapse of the Soviet Union, abandoning the ideas for which they had suffered so many hardships. They had begun to advocate liberal views, supported human rights and democracy. It was observed that they embraced the Armenian genocide allegations because they saw it as an issue that would push Turkey into a tight spot. Curiously, with a few exceptions these persons have no expertise on the subject at hand, that is, the “Armenian problem”. For example, Halil Berktaş who currently acts as the leader of the group has not even written a lengthy article on the Armenian problem let alone a full-fledged book. The speeches he has made indicate that he has only superficial knowledge on this issue.

It would be right to consider the Boğaziçi/Bilgi University meeting as an event staged in the context of a series of meetings organized by Armenia and the Armenian Diaspora to mark the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the so-called genocide. Most probably, the aim is to have as many Turkish scholars as possible say that Turks had committed genocide against Armenians in an effort to initiate in Turkey a movement towards “recognition of the genocide”. Obviously the organizers assumed that by staging such a conference shortly before the start of the Turkey-EU talks they would be able to muster support from certain circles in the EU countries as well.

However, this conference could not trigger a movement in Turkey in favor of “genocide-recognition”. In fact, it backfired. The number of people in Turkey who believe that the 1915 incidents were not a genocide has grown and, for the first time in Turkish history, these people staged a demonstration. In other words, this time the opposition to the “genocidists” was not limited to the newspaper and magazine pages. It spilled into the street in what seems to be a serious process of radicalization. In short, the results turned out to be exactly the opposite of what the organizers of the conference had hoped for.

Meanwhile, certain commentaries appearing in both the foreign<sup>21</sup> and Turkish press<sup>22</sup> maintained that with this conference yet another taboo has been destroyed, and that Turkey has taken a big step, overcoming a trauma. Among these, the six-page item that appeared in the Sept. 29, 2005 issue of *L'Express*, France's most widely read magazine, especially, drew attention. Titled "Turquie: La mémoire retrouvée" (Turkey: The memory regained), the article featured photos of "genocidist" persons such as Halil Berktaş, Murat Belge and Hrant Dink as well as photos of dead bodies allegedly belonging to slain Armenians; and it reflected entirely the Armenian views. This is not surprising since the deputy editor-in-chief of *L'Express* Christian Markarian is an Armenian as his name indicates.

Another characteristic of the articles in question is that they portray the Boğaziçi/Bilgi University conference as a kind of "watershed" indicating the point in time when Turkey started discussing the Armenian "genocide". Let us point out immediately that this is not true. It was more than a decade ago that some Turkish writers began to embrace and defend the allegation that the 1915 relocation was a genocide. The first book on this issue, Taner Akçam's "Türk Ulusal Kimliği ve Ermeni Sorunu (The Turkish National Identity and the Armenian Problem)", appeared in 1992. Also, another book by Akçam claimed in as early as 2000 that the "taboo" was being destroyed<sup>23</sup>.

What is new about the Boğaziçi/Bilgi University conference is that for the first time over 40 Turkish academics came together and declared an opinion that is in line with the Armenian genocide allegations, challenging, in a way, the argument embraced by the great majority of the Turkish people, that is, the 1915 incidents were not acts of genocide. However, that challenge has not yielded results because some other issues have overshadowed the debate itself: the difficulties the organizers encountered initially in trying to stage the conference, the turmoil caused by the demonstrations protesting the conference, and the fact that the discussions that took place during the conference have not been relayed to the public. It is ironical that the organizers were able to stage the conference only with the help of the Turkish government whose view on this matter they criticize with such vigor.

21 *Suddeutsche Zeitung*, Sept. 25, 2005, *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 25, 2005, *La Libre Belgique*, Sept. 24, 2005

22 *Milliyet*, Sept. 27, 2005, Derya Sazak, *Bir Tabu Daha Yıkıldı (Another Taboo Was Demolished)*, *gazetemnet*, Oct. 1, 2005, Ferhat Kentel: *Bir Konferans ve Travmalarımızı Aşmak (A Conference and to Surpass Our Traumas)*

23 Taner Akçam, *Ermeni Tabusu Aralanırken: Diyalogdan Başka Bir Çözüm Var Mı? (As the Armenian taboo gets thinned out: Is there any solution other than a dialogue?)*, Istanbul, 2000