

# RESEARCH ON THE ISSUE OF CHRISTIAN, HIDDEN AND/OR ISLAMIZED ARMENIANS IN TURKEY

(TÜRKİYE'DEKİ HRİSTİYAN ERMENİLER İLE GİZLİ VE/VEYA  
MÜSLÜMANLAŞMIŞ ERMENİLER ÜZERİNE BİR ARAŞTIRMA)

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**Abstract:** *In recent years, the topic of hidden and/or Islamized Armenians living in Turkey has gained great deal of importance both in Turkey and Armenia. Many authors writing on this topic express support for hidden and/or Islamized Armenians -who are currently citizens of the Republic of Turkey- returning to their “true” identities. Armenia similarly attaches particular importance to the issue of hidden and/or Islamized Armenians living in Turkey and invites some of them to Armenia to teach them Armenian culture and language. This article seeks to examine the status of the Christian, hidden and/or Islamized Armenians in Turkey as well as their activities and relations with other countries.*

**Keywords:** *Christian Armenians, Islamized Armenians, Apostate Armenians, Hidden Armenians*

**Öz:** *Son dönemde Türkiye’de yaşayan gizli ve/veya Müslümanlaşmış Ermeniler konusu hem Türkiye’de hem de Ermenistan’da büyük önem kazanmıştır. Konuyla ilgilenen birçok yazar, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti’nin vatandaşı olan gizli ve/veya Müslümanlaşmış Ermenilerin “gerçek” kimliklerine dönmelerine destek vermektedir. Özellikle Ermenistan Türkiye’de yaşayan gizli ve/veya Müslümanlaşmış Ermenilere büyük önem vermekte ve bunlardan bir kısmını Ermeni kültürü ve dilini öğretmek üzere Ermenistan’a davet etmektedir. Bu makalede Hristiyan, gizli ve/veya Müslümanlaşmış Ermenilerin içinde buldukları şartlar, bunların faaliyetleri ve diğer ülkelerle ilişkilerinin incelenmesi amaçlanmaktadır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Hristiyan Ermeniler, Müslümanlaşmış Ermeniler, Din Değiştiren Ermeniler, Gizli Ermeniler*

## INTRODUCTION

A brief historical background on Armenian-Turkish relations should be investigated to understand why some converted Armenians changed their religion from Christianity to Islam.

Contact between the Turks and Armenians began in the year 1026 with the arrival of Çağrı Bey into Anatolia. After the Seljuks defeated the Byzantines and gained control of Anatolia, Armenians became dependent on the Seljuks. After the establishment of the Ottoman Empire, Armenians became an integral part of the Ottoman Empire.

During the rise of the Ottoman Empire, Armenians were considered to be the loyal subjects of the state. During the downfall period, however, driven by provocations from imperialist countries, a well-organized and active section of the Ottoman Armenians started to yearn for the establishment of an independent Armenia on the territory that they could grab from the fragments of the disintegrated Ottoman Empire.

During World War I (WW-I), while the Ottoman Empire was fighting on eight different fronts, insurrections started by Ottoman Armenians weakened the government and many Armenians who had been conscripted in the Ottoman army fled with their weapons and joined the Russian army, while others set up armed groups and began to commit massacres in Turkish villages.<sup>1</sup>

As the slaughtering of civilians and sabotaging of the Ottoman war effort by Armenian armed groups continued despite all the warnings, the Ottoman government reached a decision on May 27, 1915 to remove its Armenian subjects from militarily sensitive areas near the warzones and to transport them to the interior of the Ottoman Empire.

However, not all Armenians in Anatolia were subjected to migration. In this context, Armenians from İstanbul, Kütahya, and Aydın provinces were not forced to migrate. On the other hand, Armenians from İzmit, Bursa, Kastamonu, Ankara, Konya, Harput, Diyarbakır, and Cilicia were forced to migrate, but eventually returned.<sup>2</sup>

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1 *Ermeni Komitelerinin Amaçları ve İhtilal Hareketleri* (Ankara: Genelkurmay Askeri Tarih ve Stratejik Etütler Başkanlığı Yayınları, 2003): 164.

2 Azmi Süslü, *Ermeniler ve 1915 Tehcir Olayı* (Ankara: Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi Yayını, 1990): 149-150 ; Yusuf Halaçoğlu, *Ermeni Tehciri ve Gerçekler 1914-1918* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 2001): 62-63.

As a result, during the application of the forced migration of Ottoman Armenians, most of the Armenians living in the areas far away from the warzone kept their religion as Christians. Meanwhile, others changed their religion to Islam in an attempt to be exempted from relocation. However, there are records showing that the Ottoman government was not interested in Armenians converting to Islam, since it sent orders to have apostate Armenians relocated as well.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, Armenians living in Turkey formed two separate groups: Christian Armenians and hidden<sup>4</sup> and/or Islamized Armenians.

In this work, the different tendencies of these Armenian groups will be examined. Since the situation of hidden and/or Islamized Armenians was also mentioned in the article titled “An Analysis of the Montebello Statement of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation in Light of the Territorial Claims of the Armenian Diaspora on Turkey”, which was published in the previous issue of *Review of Armenian Studies*, this current article will refer to the former one when it is convenient.

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### Christian Armenians

Most of the Christian Armenians living in Turkey are descended from the Ottoman Armenians who were not subjected to the relocation procedure. During the Ottoman period, Armenian citizens were not discriminated against, however, the Armenian revolts did create social scepticism and distrust towards them. There are many examples of Armenians who served in the high-level posts both in the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey.

3 İsmet Binark (ed.), *Osmanlı Belgelerinde Ermeniler (1915 – 1920)* (Ankara: Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü, 1994): 58, 69.

4 What is meant by the term ‘hidden Armenians’ is people who, for whichever reason they prefer, refrain from disclosing that they have Armenian ancestry. This explanation was provided in: Ömer Lütfi Taşcıoğlu, “An Analysis of the Montebello Statement of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation in Light of the Territorial Claims of the Armenian Diaspora on Turkey,” *Review of Armenian Studies*, No.35 (2017): 181.

In the Ottoman government, there were 22 Armenian ministers, 33 members of parliament, 29 generals, 7 ambassadors, 11 consul generals, 11 academicians, and 41 senior government officers.<sup>5</sup> In this context, 10 Armenians served as members of parliament in the First Assembly and 11 served in the Second one.<sup>6</sup>

As a specific example, Berç Keresteciyan served as deputy general manager of the Ottoman Bank and later became general manager of the Bank. He served for a period as a Deputy at the *Meclis-i Mebusan* (the Lower House) of the Ottoman Parliament.

Regarding Keresteciyan after the founding of the Republic of Turkey;

“He was awarded the Medal of Independence after the Turkish War of Independence. Following the surname reform Atatürk gave him the family name of “Türker” (means “Valiant Turk” in Turkish) for his patriotism. He became a candidate for the deputy seat of the Turkish Grand National Assembly and became the first Armenian member of the Parliament in 1935. He continued his membership of parliament for two terms more after the general elections in 1939 and 1943. During his political career in the parliament, Berç Türker Keresteciyan made significant contributions to issues of general political, economic, social and international developments.”<sup>7</sup>

“In connection to Berç Keresteciyan, today, despite the fact that Turkish Armenians make up less than one percent of Turkey’s current population, the 550-seat Turkish Grand National Assembly has three members of Armenian ethnicity, one (Markar Eseyan) from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), and two (Selina Doğan and Garo Paylan) from two of the opposition parties, Republican People’s Party (CHP) and Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP).”<sup>8</sup>

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5 Salih Yılmaz, “Statements against Turks and Supposed Armenian Genocide in a10th Grade History School Book Taught in the Armenian Republic,” *Research on the Turkish World*, No. 177 (December 2008): 112

6 *Aide –Mémorie on the rights of minorities in Turkey*, Presented to the Representatives of the Members of The League of Nations (Istanbul: National Association for The Ottoman Society of Nations, 1922): 13-14.

7 Taşcıoğlu, “An Analysis of the Montebello Statement...”, 184; Fehmi Akın, *Afyonkarahisar millevekilleri: yaşam öyküleri ve meclisteki faaliyetleri* (Istanbul: IQ Kültür Sanat Yayıncılık. 2009): 107.

8 Taşcıoğlu, “An Analysis of the Montebello Statement ...”, 185.

“As another example, Agop Martayan Dilaçar was invited to the first language congress by Atatürk and appointed as the head specialist of the Turkish Language Association in 1934. His surname Dilaçar was given by Atatürk in 1935. He worked as an instructor of Turkish language at Ankara University and served as the head advisor of the Turkish Encyclopaedia. He continued his studies as the Secretary General of Turkish Language Association until his death.”<sup>9</sup>

“Torkom Istepanyan, Levon Panos Dabağyan, Nerses Yeramyanyan, Elmas Garagor are the other dignitary examples of the Armenian citizens of the Republic of Turkey who were active in public life, including politics. One study of more than 50 Turkish Armenians found that they were content and prosperous in Turkey and felt patriotic towards their country”.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Turkish Armenian Artin Penik was so upset about the terrorist attack in the Orly Airport perpetrated by ASALA against Turkish targets that he set himself on fire in the Taksim Square as a form of protest.

“One of those who had been chosen for the important and secret posts in Turkish Republic is Professor Avedis Simon Hacınlyan whose testimony deeply affected the members of court of Orly case. In July 15, 1983, three ASALA (Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia) members placed a bomb in front of the Turkish Airlines counter at Orly Airport, Paris. The explosion killed eight and wounded about sixty people. The court found guilty and sentenced them to life time imprisonment. In the course of trials, the court called for the testimonies of some Turkish academics as experts on the Armenian issue. One of them was Associate Professor Avedis Hacınlyan”. His testimony below illuminates the situation of the Turkish Armenians in Turkey:

“I was born in Istanbul in 1944 and attended elementary school, high school and university in Turkey. Following my graduation from the university I went to the University of Chicago for graduate studies on a scholarship. After commencing my doctorate I returned to Turkey from United States of my own wish, although I could have located job opportunities abroad with my background. I was first appointed as an instructor at the Middle East Technical University. I did my military service as a reserve officer in the Research and Development Section of

9 Taşcıoğlu, “An Analysis of the Montebello Statement...” 185; “Agop Dilaçar,” *Biyografya*, accessed September 26, 2017, <http://www.biyografya.com/biyografi/15830>

10 Taşcıoğlu, “An Analysis of the Montebello Statement ...” 185 ; Michael M.Gunter, *Armenian History and the Question of Genocide* (New York: Palgrave & Macmillan. 2011).

the Ministry of Defence, a sensitive department where I had access to classified material. There were three other reserve officers there belonging to non-Muslim minorities, one Armenian and two Jewish. After my military duty, I returned to the university. During my childhood, education and my career in the university I have not been subjected to any form of discrimination because of my Armenian origin

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as openly expressed in my family name. Citizens of Armenian origin carry out their religious obligations freely and govern their foundations such as schools, hospitals and churches. The members of the Armenian community are economically in a better shape than the average citizen of Istanbul in particular or Turkey as a whole. The fact that the Armenian community is living comfortably as equal citizens of the Turkish Republic, and is not faced with discrimination.”<sup>11</sup>

There is no need to add even any more words to the testimony of Hacınlıyan to realize the circumstance of Turkish citizens of Armenian origin.

### **Hidden and/or Islamized Armenians in Turkey**

Most Turkish Armenians have been loyal citizens of the Republic of Turkey. However, some of those whose ancestors converted from Christianity to Islam and changed their Armenian names with Turkish ones, in an attempt to avoid relocation, during the WW-I, have never forgotten their roots. Some of them learn the truth at their parents' deathbed and hesitate whether or not to return their real identity.<sup>12</sup>

Recently, this topic has become more widely discussed among Armenians. The topic of hidden and/or Islamized Armenians became more popular especially

11 Taşcıoğlu, “An Analysis of the Montebello Statement...” 186; *Terrorist Attack at Orly, Statements and Evidence Presented at the Trial, February 19-March 2, 1985* (Ankara: University of Ankara, Faculty of Political Science, 1985): 33-37.

12 Raffi Bedrosyan, “To Baptize or Not to Baptize the Hidden Armenians in Turkey,” *Armenian Weekly*, August 15, 2015.

after the announcement of the Montebello statement<sup>13</sup> that was declared at the Regional Convention of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) of the Western United States, in Montebello on June 22, 2014.

One of the most salient demands in the statement is about hidden and/or Islamized Armenians. ARF claimed that hidden and/or Islamized Armenians refrain from revealing their true identities and afraid of practicing their religion openly. In this regard, ARF asks the Republic of Turkey to take all necessary steps for hidden and/or Islamized Armenians to return to their true identities if they so wish. Since ARF's statement has come to public attention, the Armenian Diaspora and many Armenian authors have referred to the statement in regard to the subject of hidden and/or Islamized Armenians in Turkey."<sup>14</sup> These fervent efforts of the Armenian Diaspora and Armenians authors on this subject reveal the importance attached to hidden and/or Islamized Armenians' returning back to their "true" identities.

On this issue, "Armenian author Rupen Melkonyan, from Yerevan State University (YSU) and the Institute of Oriental Studies of the National Academy of Sciences, states that 'It should be noted that the issue of apostate Armenians is also a delicate question for Turkey, since it is directly linked with the question of ethnic identity.'"<sup>15</sup>

### **Description of Hidden and/or Islamized Armenians**

Armenian authors have different points of view on the description of hidden and/or Islamized Armenians.

Concerning this issue historian Karen Khanlarian stated that a hidden Armenian is "... one who considers himself an Armenian, and is aware of his Armenian origin and routes, is Armenian, indisputably, no matter where he lives, what language he speaks, what his name is, or confession he was forced to accept."<sup>16</sup>

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13 Montebello Statement, Article 14: "The Republic of Turkey shall take all steps necessary to reverse, prevent and punish any attempts to discriminate against, intimidate, or harass ethnic Armenians because of their ethnicity, within its current and future borders and to allow without any hindrance hidden and/or Islamized Armenians to return to their true identities if they so wish and to practice religious and ethnic freedom without restriction or fear of retaliation."

14 Taşcıoğlu, "An Analysis of the Montebello Statement ..." 181.

15 Taşcıoğlu, "An Analysis of the Montebello Statement..." 183 ; Rupen Melkonyan, "The Problem of Islamized Armenians in Turkey," *21-st Century*, № 1 (3), Yerevan, 2008.): 97.

16 Taşcıoğlu, "An Analysis of the Montebello Statement..." 182 ; Melkonyan, "The Problem of Islamized Armenians in Turkey," 88.

Another author, Arsen Artsruni, noted that:

“An Armenian is one who in his cumulative entity has at least a single element within his overall identity allowing him to declare and admit that he is Armenian. One of those is having and admitting the Armenian ancestors, as well as the idea of nation, regarding that everyone belongs to the nation of his ancestors. This attribute is decisive, in contrast to the one of being an Armenian speaker or a Christian... The roots as a determinant of identity are the most important factor, because many “alienated” Armenians are Armenians because they remember their predecessors to have been Armenian. They have to be always accepted on our part as Armenians, not only when they achieve international recognition. ...Therefore, being Armenian by a home-country resident who understands the roots, does not have to cause any doubt at all”.<sup>17</sup>

Another Armenian author and political scientist Armen Aivazian puts forward that “An Armenian is one, who adopts Armenia as his unique home country, has a strong psychological attachment to Armenia’s land, nation, language and culture, has a feeling of personal responsibility for Armenia’s future, and is a carrier of Armenian language and culture.”

Thus, according to Aivazian, this and other factors make the person raised as an Armenian differ from one who is simply Armenian by origin. He thinks that with regard to the Armenian identity, origin is of an inferior significance, so that the issue of the real national identity is determined in the course of life of the person in question, his personal involvement and the relevant traditions.<sup>18</sup>

Such different points of view prove that there is no consensus among Armenian authors on the description of the hidden Armenians. As for the Turkish authors; most of them consider Armenians as Islamized or hidden if they have Turkish names and surnames but in fact of Armenian roots.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Number of Hidden and/or Islamized Armenians**

One of the most difficult questions is how many hidden and/or Islamized Armenian are currently living in Turkey. Rafi Bedrosyan emphasises that it is

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17 Taşcioğlu, “An Analysis of the Montebello Statement...,” 182; Melkonyan, “The Problem of Islamized Armenians in Turkey,” 89.

18 Taşcioğlu, “An Analysis of the Montebello Statement...,” 183; Melkonyan, “The Problem of Islamized Armenians in Turkey,” 89.

19 Taşcioğlu, “An Analysis of the Montebello Statement...,” 183.



more difficult to predict what proportion of them are even aware of their Armenian roots, or how many are willing to regain their Armenian identity.<sup>20</sup>

Ruben Melkonyan indicates the number of hidden and/or Islamized Armenians in Turkey in range of 80,000 to 600,000.<sup>21</sup> Another Armenian author Karen Khanlarian indicates that the number of hidden and/or Islamized Armenians in Turkey is around two million, of which 700,000–750,000 are hidden Armenians, and 1,300 000 are the Islamized Armenians.<sup>22</sup>

“Haykazun Alvrtsyan, Director of the Study Centre for Western Armenian Issues,<sup>23</sup> estimates the number of Armenians living in Turkey as 3 million<sup>24</sup> of which more than 1 million are converted Muslim Armenians who have accepted their fate and do not want to talk about it, nor others to raise the issue.”<sup>25</sup>

*These different estimations indicate that Armenian authors have different points of view on the number of hidden and/or Islamized Armenians in Turkey. In short, there is no consensus on the number of hidden and/or Islamized Armenians.*

Z.S. Andrew Demirdjian’s estimates range from 50,000 to 5 million hidden and/or Islamized Armenians living in Turkey, combined with the Hamshens along the Black Sea coast.<sup>26</sup> He considers Hamshens, who number 3-4 million, as the hidden Armenians. Armenia also attributes great importance to Hamshens and considers them to be hidden Armenians.

Nune Arevshatyan estimates that there are 5-7 million Islamized Armenians<sup>27</sup> living in Turkey. She claims that although they have accepted Islam, they have

20 Raffi Bedrosyan, “The Islamized Armenians and Us,” *The Armenian Weekly*, November 15, 2013, <https://armenianweekly.com/2013/11/15/the-islamized-armenians-and-us/>

21 Taşcıoğlu, “An Analysis of the Montebello Statement...,” 183; Melkonyan, “The Problem of Islamized Armenians in Turkey,” 98.

22 Taşcıoğlu, “An Analysis of the Montebello Statement...,” 183; Melkonyan, “The Problem of Islamized Armenians in Turkey,” 88.

23 Armenia and Armenian Diaspora quotes 19 provinces of Turkey as Western Armenia and regards this territory as Armenian soil.

24 Ashot Israelyan, “Haykazun Alvrtsyan; There are more than 3 million Armenians living in Turkey,” *Aravot.am*, June 12, 2015, <http://en.aravot.am/2015/06/12/170575/>

25 Taşcıoğlu, “An Analysis of the Montebello Statement...,” 183-184; Israelyan, “Haykazun Alvrtsyan; There are more than...”

26 Z.S. Andrew Demirdjian, “Armenia Irredenta Annexation of Western Armenia,” *www.armenianlife.com*, November 16, 2015, 3.

27 Nune Arevshatyan, “‘According to various sources, there are 5-7 million Islamized Armenians in Turkey’. Politician,” *Aravot.am*, April 25, 2015, <http://en.aravot.am/2015/04/25/169916/>

retained their dialects and large amount of them have been returning to their roots, becoming Christian.<sup>28</sup>

These different estimations indicate that Armenian authors have different points of view on the number of hidden and/or Islamized Armenians in Turkey. In short, there is no consensus on the number of hidden and/or Islamized Armenians.

### **Hidden and/or Islamized Armenians as Disguised as Alevi-Kurds**

Hidden Armenians reportedly live in the Tunceli province of Turkey under Kurdish-Alevi identity, where the majority people are Alevi. These Alevi people are mostly of Kurdish and Zaza origin. A vast number of the local population of Dersim (Tunceli) Alevi are said to be converted Armenians who have embraced the Zaza identity and accepted the Alevi faith under various circumstances.<sup>29</sup> Closer scrutiny of their expressions (such as “Alevi Muslim”) reveals that whereas most of them are aware of their ancestral origins, they refuse to accept it openly, especially to outsiders. The “Alevi Muslim” expression could be a kind of defence strategy. Or, it could contain a hidden message; the interlocutor may deliberately use it to show his/her Armenian identity.<sup>30</sup>

The chairman of Turkmen-Alevi-Bektashi Foundation has stated that one million hidden Armenians disguise themselves as Kurdish Alevi and some of them take part in terrorist activities. He also claims that some of the hidden Armenians are holding positions among high level officials in the press, bureaucracy and the state.<sup>31</sup>

By the virtue of their positions as politicians, academicians and journalists, some of the hidden and/or Islamized Armenians who accuse Turkey of genocide have an impact on the politicians and public of the foreign countries. Since these politicians and foreign publics do not have sufficient knowledge about the Armenian issue, hidden and/or Islamized Armenians are able to create

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28 Israelyan, “Haykazun Alvrtsyan; There are more than...,”

29 Varak Ketsemanian, “Dersim: A Facet of the Silent Revolution in Turkey,” *The Armenian Weekly*, September 9, 2013 ; Masoud Jan, “How many crypto Armenians live in Turkey under the identity of Kurdish-Alevi?” *Quora.com*, October 15, 2017, <https://www.quora.com/How-many-crypto-Armenians-live-in-Turkey-under-the-identity-of-Kurdish-Alevi>

30 Ketsemanian, “Dersim: A Facet of the Silent Revolution in Turkey...”

31 “Türkiye’deki Alevilerin içine sızan 1 milyon kırpto Ermeni var!” *İnternetHaber.com*, 27 Ekim 2015, <http://www.internethaber.com/turkiyedeki-alevilerin-icine-sizan-1-milyon-kirpto-ermeni-var-807497h.htm>

the impression that Turks are admitting to the “Armenian Genocide”. This adverse effect paves the way for resolutions on the recognition of “Armenian Genocide” to be adopted in the parliaments of those countries.

Their impact on the Turkish public becomes more drastic. The Turkish public hesitates about which claim is fact-based and which is not.

### Returning of hidden Armenians to their true identities

“Recently, some of the hidden Armenians have given up concealing their identity and have started to criticize their parents for giving them Turkish names. One of those people stated to the Istanbul based weekly *Agos* newspaper that he has changed his previous name from ‘Selahattin Gültekin’ to the Armenian name ‘Miran Pırığıç Gültekin’ and had been baptized 2 years ago [Miran Gültekin converted from Alevism to Christianity through an official baptism and an application to the Armenian religious authorities in Yerevan].<sup>32</sup> ‘He added that together with 70 others who had switched to their old Armenian identity, they had established an association named ‘Faith and Social Benevolent Society of Armenians of Dersim’. He claims that the number of hidden Armenians in Turkey exceeds 500,000, but there is no need for them to hide themselves anymore.”<sup>33</sup>

“He complained of being criticized by the hidden Armenians among his acquaintances for uncovering their real identity. His admission demonstrates that most of the ‘hidden’ Armenians do not want to return their Armenian origin. It appears that only a small minority prefer returning to their original identity.”<sup>34</sup>

Some hidden Armenians, however, do not change their names after conversion. One of those who prefer to keep their names is Fethiye Çetin.<sup>35</sup>

“Her grandmother Seher was an Armenian Christian who was adopted by a Turkish military officer as a child during the Armenian relocation.<sup>36</sup> She first published her memoir in Turkey, entitled *My Grandmother* in

32 Ketsemanian, “Dersim: A Facet of the Silent Revolution in Turkey...”

33 Taşcıoğlu, “An Analysis of the Montebello Statement...,” 187.

34 Taşcıoğlu, “An Analysis of the Montebello Statement...,” 187; “Gizli Ermeniler Gerçek Kimliklerine Dönüyor,” *Agos Gazetesi*, February 9, 2012.

35 She is the attorney representing the family of the murdered Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink.

36 “Çetin to Speak about Challenges Facing Islamized Armenians...”

which she spoke of her grandmother's hidden identity. The book sparked a conversation among Turks about the fate of the Ottoman Armenians in 1915. This resulted in an explosion of debate on Islamized Armenians and their legacy in contemporary Muslim families."<sup>37</sup>

"My Grandmother" was followed by another book edited by Ayşegül Altınay and Fethiye Çetin, titled *The Grandchildren*, about dozens of Turkish/Kurdish people describing their Armenian roots, without revealing their real identities.<sup>38</sup> Then, Surp Giragos Armenian Church was reconstructed in Diyarbakir, which became a destination for many hidden Armenians in Eastern Anatolia. On average, over a hundred people visit the church daily, most of them hidden Armenians. Some come to pray, get baptized, or get married, but most just visit to feel Armenian, without converting back to Christianity.<sup>39</sup>

Fethiye Çetin and Ayşegül Altınay wrote another book titled *The Hidden Legacy of Lost Armenians in Turkey*. The Centre for Holocaust and Genocide Studies of Ramapo College and the Armenian National Committee (ANC) of New Jersey had co-sponsored a talk by her titled: "'Hidden' No More: Challenges Facing Islamized Armenians in Turkey" on November 12, 2015 at Ramapo College.<sup>40</sup>

Fethiye Çetin was born and raised in Turkey to become a lawyer, writer, and human rights activist. Her grandmother's roots were discussed at this presentation and she was awarded with the ANCA (Armenian National Committee of America) Freedom Award which is said to be ANCA's highest and most prestigious award.<sup>41</sup>

"Another book written on this subject is *The Essence of Identity: Islamized & Hidden Armenians in Turkey*. The book was written by Laurence Ritter from L'Écol des hautes études and sciences sociales (EHESS), and Cafer Sarıkaya from Boğaziçi University, Istanbul. Laurence Ritter was likewise invited by AGBU (Armenian General Benevolent Union) to speak in Yerevan, Armenia on October 13, 2016."<sup>42</sup>

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37 Taşcıoğlu, "An Analysis of the Montebello Statement...", 181-182.

38 Raffi Bedrosyan, "The Islamized Armenians and Us", November 15, 2013.

39 Bedrosyan, "The Islamized Armenians and Us", November 15, 2013.

40 "Çetin to Speak about Challenges Facing Islamized Armenians in NJ," *The Armenian Weekly*, November 6, 2015.

41 "Çetin to Speak about Challenges Facing Islamized Armenians...", "

42 Taşcıoğlu, "An Analysis of the Montebello Statement...", 182 ; Laurence Ritter and Cafer Sarıkaya, *The Essence of Identity: Islamized & Hidden Armenians in Turkey* (Yerevan: Armenian General Benevolent Union, 2016).

### Armenia's plans for Hidden Armenians and Project Rebirth

Armenia attributes great importance to hidden and Islamized Armenians living in Turkey and invites some of them to Armenia to teach them Armenian culture and language. For this purpose, in cooperation with the Armenian government, Raffi Bedrosyan initiated a project called Project Rebirth. Bedrosyan explains that the goal of the project is to help the hidden and/or Islamized Armenians find their Armenian roots, culture, and language by organizing Armenian language classes in places like Diyarbakir and Tunceli, as well as planning trips for them to Armenia.<sup>43</sup> Within this scope, 80 hidden Armenians, 50 from Diyarbakır and 30 from the other cities were hosted by Armenia in August 2014. The Armenian Ministry of Diaspora and Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation organised another special trip to Armenia in 2015.<sup>44</sup> Invitees were selected amongst the hidden and/or Islamized Armenians living in Turkey. One of the attendees stated that; “before I went to Armenia I was a Kurd, and I returned as an Armenian.” One other stated; “For years I fought for the rights of Kurds before I found out I was an Armenian at the deathbed of my father. Now I want to go fight in Nagorno-Karabakh.”<sup>45</sup> The timing of the trip was made to coincide with the Pan-Armenian Games, which brought more than 6,200 Armenian athletes from all over the world to Armenia, including 450 from Van, Bitlis, Muş, Tunceli, Diyarbakır and Hatay regions of Turkey. Armenia claims that Turkish invitees represent the historic Armenian homeland.<sup>46</sup>

This attribution proves that Armenia still considers the eastern part of Turkey as Armenian homeland.<sup>47</sup>

On the other hand, as stated previously, Armenia considers the Hamshens of Turkey as hidden/Islamized Armenians. Saida Oganyan, an ethnographer who

43 Raffi Bedrosyan, “The Plight of Hidden or Islamised Armenians in Turkey,” *The Armenian Weekly*, November 18, 2016.

44 Raffi Bedrosyan, “Project Rebirth: Homecoming of ‘Hidden Armenians,’” *The Armenian Weekly*, August 11, 2015.

45 Bedrosyan, “The Plight of Hidden or Islamised Armenians...”

46 Bedrosyan, “Project Rebirth...”

47 As indicated in footnote 23, Armenia and the Armenian Diaspora quote 19 provinces of Turkey as “Western Armenia” and regard this territory as Armenian soil. On the official web site of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia (besides the reference to “Western Armenia” in Armenia’s Declaration of Independence), there are multiple references to “Western Armenia”, which is imagined by the ARF and other nationalist Armenians to stretch from the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea to the coasts of the Black Sea and overlaps with the Eastern Anatolian territory of the Republic of Turkey. But calling some portion of Anatolia as “Western Armenia” is against the Chapter I, Article 2 of the Charter of the United Nations which instructs “all members to refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations”. This explanation was provided in: Taşcıoğlu, “An Analysis of the Montebello Statement...,” 157-159.

heads the Amshenka Union of Hamshen Armenians, claims that this little-known group may become an ideological -and even more broadly- a political and security challenge in the coming months, especially if tensions between Moscow and Ankara re-emerge or if Yerevan decides it needs to focus on a foreign problem to distract attention from its domestic ones.<sup>48</sup> If her predictions come true, this can create new problems not only for the Hamshens, but also for Turkey, Armenia, and the Russian Federation.<sup>49</sup>

According to Oganyan, Hamshens could be used as an instrument of temptation by Russia to interfere with Turkey and to exploit international attention toward minority peoples. She suggests that Hamshens also could be used as an instrument for the revision of the borders between the Republic of Turkey and the Republic of Armenia, in favour of the latter.<sup>50</sup>

These suggestions explain why Armenia invites the hidden and/or Islamized Armenians to Armenia and seeks to teach them Armenian culture and language.

### **Viewpoint of Hrant Dink on hidden and/or Islamized Armenians**

The issue of hidden and/or Islamized Armenians brings to mind the announcement that Hrant Dink made shortly before his assassination, at the Malatya Chamber of Commerce on April 15, 2006.

One of the important points in Dink's announcement was regarding the number of the hidden and/or Islamized Armenians in Turkey. He claimed that their numbers exceed 500,000.<sup>51</sup> Dink criticized hidden and/or Islamized Armenians for not revealing their identity and added that he might reveal their identities when convenient.<sup>52</sup>

Shortly after Dink's murder, over 100,000 people gathered in Taksim Square holding the same banners "we are all Armenians" and "we are all Hrant Dink." During these demonstrations, a Turkish Armenian journalist who lives in Germany linked up to a Turkish TV channel and drew attention to the some of the demonstrators that he had recognised some of them as members of the terrorist organization PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party). This highlights the

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48 Paul Goble, "Islamicized Armenians in Turkey: A Bridge or a Threat?", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 14, Issue 46 (April 5, 2017).

49 Paul Goble, "Islamicized Armenians in Turkey..."

50 Paul Goble, "Islamicized Armenians in Turkey..."

51 Arslan Bulut, "Devletin içindeki gizli Ermeniler!", *Yeniçağ Gazetesi*, 22 Eylül 2010.

52 "Yusuf Halaçoğlu Ateşyan'ı Doğruladı: 500.000 Kripto Ermeni var," *OdaTV.com*, 23 Eylül 2010.

importance of carrying out further research into the claims made by the chairman of Turkmen-Alevi-Bektashi Foundation and what this entails for Turkey and its society.

On the other hand, Hrant Dink's announcement was criticized by diaspora Armenian entities and people within the Republic of Armenia- who condemned him and his ideological construct regarding the "hidden Armenians" of Turkey as bringing back a taboo to life.<sup>53</sup> However, his murder caused an adverse effect and ignited the spark of self-recognition and self-assertion, and instead initiated a campaign of returning to ancestral roots among Turkish-Armenians, especially in the Eastern Anatolian provinces.<sup>54</sup>

### **Hrant Dink's Warning to the Separatist Kurds**

The second important point of Hrant Dink's announcement was about the United States of America's and the European Union's alleged efforts to drag Turks and Armenians into a confrontation. During his speech, he also criticized the US and the EU for their Kurdish policies.

Dink evoked that, following the US intervention in Iraq, the separatist Kurds in Turkey were encouraged to fight for autonomy followed by independence like the Kurds in Iraq. Dink forewarned the Kurds that the imperialist states always pursue such policies for their own benefit and upon reaching their goals, they abandon people like the Kurds to their own fate. He added that, just like Armenians were deceived during WW-I, Kurds were also being deceived by the US in the hope of establishment of a Kurdish state in Turkish lands. Dink advised that if Kurds do not want to be fooled like the Armenians were in the past, they should not rely on the promises of the US and remember that after the withdrawal of the US forces, Kurds would be left alone with the Turkish people.

Dink's explanations pointed out that Kurds were being maliciously manipulated by imperialist countries to serve these countries' interests. Dink also admitted the mistake of the Armenian leadership in rebelling against the Ottoman Empire during WW-I.<sup>55</sup> Their plan was not only to establish Kurdistan in Turkish land but also to establish Western Armenia based on the

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53 Garabet K. Moundjian, "Armenian Involvement in the 1925-1946 Kurdish Rebellions in Republican Turkey: Trying to Map the Origins of "Hidden Armenians," *Academia*, November 21, 2017, <http://www.academia.edu/30409786>

54 Ketsemanian, "Dersim: A Facet of the Silent Revolution in Turkey...".

55 "Hrant, Kürtleri 11 yıl önce uyarıştı", *Aydınlık*, 26 Eylül 2017.

population of the hidden Armenians who would decipher their real identity in due time.

As it was emphasized in the article of Garabet K. Moundjian that “*ARF aims that Armenians should repatriate to their historic homeland on the basis of “hidden Armenians” existed in the Eastern Provinces of the Republic of Turkey*”.<sup>56</sup> The involvement of the ARF leaders in the Kurdish rebellion in Turkey could create a unique opportunity to reach this goal. For this purpose, ARF had an implicit participation in the formation of Kurdish Hoyboun organization in Lebanon. The first meeting of Kurds and Armenians took place in the summer residence of the famous ARF leader Vahan Papazian.<sup>57</sup>

ARF also took the total control of the Dersim and Ağrı rebellious forces during the Dersim and Ağrı insurrections.<sup>58</sup>

Recently United States’ foreign intelligence service CIA declassified the documents that showcase the cooperation between ASALA and PKK on December 22, 2016. According to these documents, Kurdish-Armenian cooperation was established to fight against the common enemy, Turkey, and has been developed from 1991 onwards.<sup>59</sup>

All these endeavors and cooperation between separatist Kurds and Armenians and Armenia’s invitations of hidden Armenians to teach them Armenian culture and language into their minds reveal the intention of Armenia to control eastern and south-eastern part of Turkey through hidden Armenians.

Some hidden Armenians take part in the above-mentioned activities in cooperation and coordination with the separatist Kurdish movement in Turkey. A couple of years ago, some of the mayors in south-eastern part of Turkey - like in Diyarbakır and Van- had even started to change the Turkish highway signs,<sup>60</sup> street names and welcome signs<sup>61</sup> as well as the city names into Armenian.<sup>62</sup> At the beginning of the Kurdish insurrection, the Turkish

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56 Moundjian, “Armenian Involvement . . .,” 53.

57 Moundjian, “Armenian Involvement . . .,” 8.

58 Moundjian, “Armenian Involvement . . .,” 35-44.

59 Hazel Çağan Elbir, “CIA Declassified the Documents on the Cooperation Between ASALA and PKK,” Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM), Commentary No: 2017 / 12, February 14, 2017, <http://avim.org.tr/en/Yorum/CIA-DECLASSIFIED-THE-DOCUMENTS-ON-THE-COOPERATION-BETWEEN-ASALA-AND-PKK>

60 “BDP’li Başkana Ermeni Krallığı Nişanı Verildi,” *Sabah*, 19 Haziran 2011.

61 “Çok Dilli’ Tabela Sorguda,” *Radikal*, 4 Temmuz 2012, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/cok-dilli-tabela-sorguda-1093120/>

62 Osman Bekleyen (DHA), “İlçenin İsmi Tabelaya Ermenice Yazıldı,” *Milliyet*, 24 Temmuz 2014, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/ilcenin-ismi-tabelaya-ermenice-gundem-1916601/>



government tolerated these practices. However, after the escalation of terrorist attacks in the south-eastern part of Turkey and after the emergence of the relation and support of these separatist-minded mayors with PKK, the government removed them from office and started legal prosecution against them.

### Repair Future Project

An Armeno-Turkish platform called “Repair Future” accuses Turkey of having committed the “Armenian Genocide” and encourages hidden and/or Islamized Armenians to return to their Armenian identity.<sup>63</sup>

The partners of the “Repair” Project are Yerkir Europe, Region Phone Alpes, Foundation Kalust Gulbenkyan and Anadolu Kültür.

Most of the authors who write articles on Repair Future blame Turkey with the crime of genocide and support Kurdish, Assyrian, Alevi, Greek, and Armenian separatism in Turkey.

Anadolu Kültür, the Turkish partner of the Repair Future Project thanks the organizations which have supported various projects and activities of Anadolu Kültür since its establishment, in the web site.<sup>64</sup> The activities that the Anadolu Kültür specifies in its web site include: intercultural, inter-institutional and interdisciplinary performances reflecting the Armenian and Kurdish culture<sup>65</sup>, and discussions supporting Kurdish movies and printing and publishing of bilingual (Armenian and Kurdish) children’s books.

Anadolu Kültür has become associated with both hidden Armenians and Kurdish separatist groups, especially in the eastern cities considered as Armenian soil by the Armenians and the other cities in which a good number of the hidden Armenians have lived. The total number of these cities exceeds 35.<sup>66</sup>

### Turks who write for The Armenian Weekly

The activities of Repair Future and Anadolu Kültür, mentioned above, are the mutual activities of Turks (or people who claim they are Turks) and Armenians.

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63 Lilit Gasparian, “Armenian Genocide: Recognition and Reparations,” *Repair Future*, October 17, 2014.

64 “Revealing the City through Memory 2015,” *AnadoluKültür.org*, June 29, 2015, <http://www.anadolukultur.org/en/events>

65 “Revealing the City through Memory 2015.”

66 “Revealing the City through Memory 2015.”

But some of the artists and authors in Turkey are not content with these activities. They also send articles to Armenian weeklies, give lectures fiercely criticizing Turkey, and attend various activities supporting the Armenian theses. The Armenian Weekly gives wide coverage to these articles, conferences and similar activities and makes use of these Turks as means of criticizing and putting pressure on the Republic of Turkey.

A typical example of these articles written by Turks is a special report for the Armenian Weekly titled “The Reign of Lies in Turkey” dated May 11, 2012. In this article, the author emphasizes the effect of lies by the comments below:

“Organized denial means the reign of lies. The denialist, in order to sustain denial, has to resolutely and incessantly lie. Otherwise it can’t go on. “We in Turkey all live in this world of lies, so much so that our textbooks, news agencies, official documents, literature, and even surnames are likely telling us lies. Even our parents may have told us lies about our family history. Our whole identity may be a fabrication.”<sup>67</sup>

Apparently, with her last sentence, the author refers to the hidden and/or Islamized Armenians disguising themselves with Turkish names. Between the years 2008-2012, this author wrote 34 articles for the Armenian Weekly criticizing Turkey, supporting Armenian allegations, and encouraging hidden and/or Islamized Armenians to return to their identity.

## Conclusion

In the centenary of the events of 1915, the Republic of Armenia, the Armenian diaspora and their supporters launched a campaign for the Republic of Turkey’s recognition of what they termed the “Armenian Genocide”. In coordination with this aim, Armenia exploits hidden, and/or Islamized Armenians living in Turkey to put pressure on Turkey and invites some of these people to Armenia to teach them Armenian culture and language.

On the other hand, ARF aims that Armenians should repatriate to their historic homeland on the basis of “hidden Armenians” that exist in the Eastern Provinces of Turkey. They consider the Kurdish rebellion in Turkey as a unique opportunity to reach this goal.

As for the hidden and/or Islamized Armenians, most of them are loyal to Turkey. But some others, who are under the influence of Armenian diaspora,

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67 Ayşe Günaysu, “The Reign of Lies in Turkey,” *The Armenian Weekly*, May 11, 2012.

disguise themselves with Turkish identity, give lectures, arrange and attend forums, write books and reviews and produce movies to criticize Turks as perpetrators of genocide and support the separatist Kurdish groups in Turkey.

Recently, activities of the hidden and Islamized Armenians have become more pronounced, surpassing the pressure exerted by third-party countries, and some of the Armenian citizens of Turkey have started to explicitly cooperate with separatist Kurds and Armenia.

While some of them carry on their activities and collaboration using their Turkish identity, some others, finding it unnecessary to conceal themselves, have been baptised and have returned to their roots by assuming Armenians names.

Within this context, the Republic of Turkey should encourage hidden and Islamized Armenians to return to their roots, if they so wish. What Turkey needs most of all is to encourage academic research into the issue of hidden and/or Islamized Armenians to understand how these people think and feel, what they want for their future and their country, and what they entail for Turkey.

*Within this context, the Republic of Turkey should encourage hidden and Islamized Armenians to return to their roots, if they so wish. What Turkey needs most of all is to encourage academic research into the issue of hidden and/or Islamized Armenians to understand how these people think and feel, what they want for their future and their country, and what they entail for Turkey.*

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