

## National Identity and the Role of Diaspora: A Constructivist Approach to Turkish-Armenian Relations

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### Abstract

*Armenia and Turkey are the two countries which couldn't develop a stable and peaceful foreign policy and bilateral relations by sticking in their pasts. Any commercial, political and diplomatic initiatives would be substantial and sufficient for many countries, but not for these two. Bilateral relations are carried on statically and stay on the plane of 1915 events without any improvement. Both of the countries have different approaches and claims regarding the events of 1915, thus reconciliation seems unlikely. They have both built their national identities on the sad events of their past and carry on their foreign policies accordingly. Diaspora has been involved in this identity building process at the Armenian side. The constructivist theory explains the extent of established identities' influence on foreign policy actors. The existing national identities already built are in a position obstructing bilateral relations and leading to an exclusionary approach in the foreign policies of Turkey and Armenia. It may be important for both sides to build new identities toward each other to establish a peaceful and long-term communication in addition to concrete initiatives and steps in terms of political, commercial, and diplomatic affairs.*

**Keywords:** Identity, Diaspora, constructivist theory, 1915, Turkish-Armenian relations

### Introduction

Armenia and Turkey are two states which carry the burden of their heavy past and cannot develop normal bilateral relations today. We do not witness any commercial and political relations, and a stable foreign policy between them from the beginning of their statehood started. Although any political and economic initiatives may be sufficient to many states, these two states need more than that. Bi-lateral relations between the two countries have remained stagnant at 1915 events without any sign of betterment. Both countries hold essentially conflicting claims on 1915 events. Different claims on 1915 events have become inherent to the national identities of both sides by the way of mutual exclusion and perception of the "other". The foreign policies of both countries against each other are maintained through these deeply settled and constructed national identities. Additionally, diaspora has actively been involved in the process of the construction of Armenian national identity. Constructivist theory tries to explain to what degree foreign policy agents are influenced by the construction of their national identities. In the foreign policies of Turkey and Armenia towards each other, existing constructed national identities set barriers to bilateral relations. In order to reach reconciliation and settle positive peaceful and long-term relations, it needs to be a two-stage solution. The first stage includes solutions to historical and political problems. Besides, common commercial and economic activities would be helpful to the peace process. The second stage which is the focus of this article, the emphasis on the construction of new national identities. It may be required that both sides reconstruct their identities vis-a-vis each other.

### *The Construction of National Identities from the Reference Point of the Year 1915*

Identity has become a fundamental concept in many fields of the social sciences. The most emphasized point regarding identities is their changing, fluid, and sometimes imposing nature. According to Foucault (2011), identities are established by discourses. Every individual has social and national identities in addition to his/her own identities. If these identities are easily changed and are constructed within a certain context, they may be called relatively weak. If these identities constitute an unchangeable and essential part of an individual's self-image, they are strong (Grad and Rojo 2008, pp. 3-28).

In any case, distinct and multiple identities all together is mentioned for individuals. Social identities are constructed by social interactions and pass through re-creation, reconciliation, or rejection processes by means of discourses (Grad and Rojo 2008, p. 8). According to constructivist theory, every identity is established by social interaction, at the same time open to challenges and reconciliations (Grad and Rojo 2008, p. 9). Thus, created national identities are not unchangeable realities, but they can enter into changing and reconciling processes by means of social interactions.

In the case of national identities, wars and traumas and ideologies may become influential in the construction processes. Turkey built its own identity on the perception of the World War I and Ottoman heritage. Those people who joined the war against the Empire or separated from it were excluded from the perception of identity even today. The general social attitude toward Armenians is related with this perception and the image of any Armenian in the eyes of Turkish society may have link with the “betrayal” during the time of the war. The loyalty is the main focus of Turkish national identity. Whereas the Armenian side defines its identity based on exposure to violence and the year 1915 has a core place in their national identity. The word ‘genocide’ is the first thing rejected by Turkey, and this rejection is incorporated in the national identity as an inherent attitude. When the word ‘genocide’ is pronounced, it is considered as a greater crime or the crime of crimes. So, genocide is mostly used not on a legal basis but used for emphasizing the sadness and extent of the events. The most important reason of the fact that this word is a taboo for the new Republic because of the is the suspicion and concern that the perpetrators of the crimes committed are either the founding fathers of Turkey or persons who had contributed to the Turkish nationalism. Although, the allegations regarding separation of Atatürk from the Unionists take a wide place (Zürcher, Milli Mücadelede İttihatçılık, 2010, p. 79) in the official history, it is known that a large number of civilians and soldiers from the Union and Progress Party which committed war crimes had supported both the War of Liberation and the new regime (Zürcher, Milli Mücadelede İttihatçılık, 2010, pp. 249-256). On the other side, discharge of many high-level bureaucrats by Atatürk from his surroundings and decision-making mechanisms by proceedings of 1926 and dismissals implies that he fell into disagreement with some Unionists (Zürcher, Milli Mücadelede İttihatçılık, 2010, pp. 213-248).

The continuity between the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey in terms of human resources and ideas would not imply that the subsequent administrators of the state and the community are overall guilty at all. The most effective factors in construction of the Turkish identity are the public institutions and the national education system as the same with its many contemporaries.<sup>1</sup> The events of 1915 are not one of the basic pillars of the national identity. Since the near past is full of pains for the young Republic, too; neither these pains nor the ones caused are easy to face with. As a matter of the fact, the priority of economic, cultural, political, and ethnic problems makes it impossible to talk about the events of 1915 or seek solutions for problems with its neighbor Armenia. While constructing the Turkish identity; a portrait of a nation from the Ottomans to the present day that welcomes everybody and all faiths with a high level of tolerance. It has been emphasized that, the Ottoman Empire was the only Empire tolerated non-Muslim communities in its period. The events of 1915 create a conflict with this perception of identity. That’s why, these events are considered as an exceptional case in the time of the Empire. According to Akçam, since the Turkish identity is an identity formed lately, it has a nature in rush to close the gap (Akçam, Türk Ulusal Kimliğine Ermeni Sorunu, 2001, p. 51). The Turkish identity had been started to be mentioned by those who have been sent to Europe for education in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus this date is quite late compared to many communities (Akçam, Türk Ulusal Kimliğine Ermeni Sorunu, 2001, p. 51). Besides the glorification of the Turkish identity starting from the period of the Young Turks is a reaction to defeats of wars with Europeans and Tsarist Russia (Akçam, Türk Ulusal Kimliğine Ermeni Sorunu, 2001, p. 67). According to Bauman, identity of a “foreigner” may be created under specific circumstances easily in multiethnic societies. Furthermore, this division is almost one of the fundamental human necessities (Bauman 1992, pp. 675-701). These “foreigners” may be considered to be inclined to wrong deeds and live on the same soil, but should not be there at all; so that they are excluded.

Likewise, Armenians had been perceived as foreigners in the late period of the Ottomans, the period in which the Turkish identity has been formed. Armenians are a community keeping the past traumas in their identity of the present day.

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<sup>1</sup> For detailed information regarding how the national identities are established by the states by means of discourse, refer to: R. Wodak, R. de Cillia, M. Reisigl and K. Liebhart, *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, Translated by, A. Hirsch, R. Mitten, J. W. Unger, Second Edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 7-48.

They were forced to leave the lands where they had lived for thousands of years as an autochthonous community, incurring great losses during this migration. It means that remaining weak and vulnerable against the governmental mechanisms may lead to face with the danger of being completely extinct (Phillips 1989). This feeling seems to pass down from generation to generation. Incurring losses and the threat of extinction are so inherent in the Armenian national identity that, they reacted with bated breath to the earthquake disaster of 1988 more than many communities (Shain and Barth 2003, p. 468). The same attitude has been also observed on the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh occurred between 1992 and 1994 (MacDonald 2008, p. 120).

One of the most important and influential proponent of the Armenian identity is the Armenian Diaspora. The priority of remembering and recognition of the events of 1915, and keeping the past alive is much more important than all other economic and political matters for the Armenian Diaspora (MacDonald 2008). Because, about 80% of Diaspora population in the USA are the relatives of the survivors from the events of 1915 who migrated to USA (Shain and Barth 2003, p. 468). The national identity based on sharing the pain is one of the important determinants holding Diaspora together. This identity has not been created by the state and its discourses, on the contrary of the Turkish identity. The Armenian identity entirely starts with the family for Diaspora. Some part of Diaspora is still living within the Armenian community. They endeavor to diminish the effects of the cultures in the countries they migrated in and to keep their culture alive as much as possible (Pattie 2005, p. 143). Authors who conducted researches on the Armenian identity state that identities pass through construction processes of individual moral values transferred from the grandparents' memoirs and parents' attitudes. Besides, Armenian schools, youth federations, and institutions such as different Armenian churches contribute the socialization processes (Miller and Miller, *Memory, Identity Across Generations*, 1991, pp. 18-37). It is claimed that, wide family relations in particular have a very important role on the transfer of the national identity to the new generations (Miller and Miller, *Memory, Identity Across Generations*, 1991, pp. 18-37).

Diaspora is not a homogeneous whole, on the contrary, incorporates a wide variety of ideologies, linguistic and religious differences (Pattie 2005, p. 131). There are those who put the events of 1915 in the center of their lives, but there are also other groups remembering these events as little as possible and adapted to the country they migrated (Pattie 2005, p. 28). By any means, commemoration of the events of 1915 is one of the core concepts of the national identity. Although Turkey was established after the date 1915, it is required by diaspora to recognize the events as genocide and accept the responsibility of the actions. Diaspora's lobbies and their activities all over the world intends to ensure decisions recognizing the "genocide" by the parliaments of many states, so that to hear the voice of Diaspora and to constitute a political pressure on Turkey. The reason of the expectation from Turkey to take the responsibility of the events as a state established in 1923 is the idea of continuity of it with the Ottoman Empire. According to some authors, the population policies of the new Republic are in a substantial continuity with the Ottoman bureaucrats especially the ones of the Committee of Union and Progress Party (Üngör, *Seeing like a nation-state*, 2008, p. 16). As matter of fact, the perpetrators had allegedly appointed to important administrative positions in the new country since there were no authorities available to judge (Göçek 2006, p. 213). In fact, the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey have not been perceived so different from each other within the Western literature and Diaspora, to the extent that the dates of establishment are sometimes confused.

### ***National Identity and the Constructivist Theory***

Constructivism is relatively new in the field of international relations. It is a better approach compared to classical theories in describing the international politics in some respects today. The constructivist theory is also one of the most helpful theories of international relations for understanding the identity, Diaspora, the activities of Diaspora, and the impacts of these activities on the foreign policy. Diasporas generally have a unique and distinctive position. Although they reside outside the state that they are connected or feel loyal and they may establish a bond as if they are in this lands. The blood ties and cultural ties, between or thought to be between Diaspora and those who live in the home state are significant in terms of constitution of a group which is outside the state. Diaspora may become a factor of foreign policy due to the "international" positions of its members and come to an influential position in the identities created by states, the roles provided, and even in the identities gained by communities. Because of their international positions, Diaspora more or less influential on the foreign policies of both host states they live and home states they believed to be belong. In particular, if Diaspora is in a state which provides wide civil rights and freedoms, their influence as a group both on the home and host state may be expected to be great.

Moreover, if the home state is a country experiencing economic and/or political weaknesses, this impact may be much stronger. Therefore, Diaspora keeps an influential position in varying degrees depending on the conditions and the context of home and host states. In addition the identities, constructivism may help describing the extent of impacts of the motives, preferences, foreign policy behaviors, and the forms of communication. Diaspora is the most significant actor capable of linking international and internal policy areas to each other and of broadening the internal policy concept (Shain and Barth 2003, p. 451). Motivations, demands, and political tendencies of Diaspora based on identity may pose a factor on the formation of national identities in the home state. Because, Diaspora is outside the mechanism of the state, but it is inside in terms of influence and the formation of identity. The traditional theories of international relations regard the state pursuing maximization of interests (Shain and Barth 2003, p. 457). According to these theories the international system is an anarchical structure built of national interests and this anarchical structure is composed of given information (Griffiths, Roach and Solomon 2011, p. 153). On the other hand, the constructivism prefers to regard the states as social actors. As a social actor, every state is a structure requiring to create an identity and to express it within the context of rules and compliance search (Griffiths, Roach and Solomon 2011, p. 153). Constructivism in this sense includes various approaches towards national interests and national identities. For this theory national interests are not constant and may considerably be influenced by national identities.

The national identity itself is not constant either and formed and changed by both international and internal factors (Wendt, *Anarchy Is What States Make of It*, 1994, pp. 77-94). All changes in national identity impacts on national interests as well and changes in time. Thus, just insight into national interests only would not be sufficient to understand the behavior and foreign policy decisions of a state within the international system (Shain and Barth 2003, p. 458). According to constructivists, the communication and interaction between states play an important role in formation of the identities and interests. The international system emerges and created repeatedly within the communication processes. The important point here is that, the identities of the actors are not given and fixed but have a nature of developing and transforming within the communication processes (Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 1999, pp. 71-72). According to Wendt, an important name of the constructivist theory, international relations and the anarchical system are not a given structure; on the contrary they are mostly a social fiction (Wendt, *Collective Identity Formation*, 1994, pp. 384-396). The international actors, i.e. states obtain identities and roles within this system. These identities influence their actions, decisions, and interests. Besides, these identities are created during interaction with others and coming right after the concepts of national security and national interests. International politics is just an ongoing process in the everyday sense, whereas every state creates and changes its identity during its relations with others (Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations*, 2004, p. 40).

The reason of the significance of the identity is the fact that it forms the basis of national interests. The identity issue is in a key position for creating different security perceptions and international systems as well (Zehfuss, *Constructivism and identity*, 2006, p. 95). Identities can be changed by communication processes under any circumstances (Zehfuss, *Constructivism and identity*, 2006, p. 95). Therefore, the perception of national interest containing the concepts of physical security, autonomy, economic well-being, and collective self-esteem are formed and can be changed by the communication processes of states (Zehfuss, *Constructivism and identity*, 2006, p. 96). However, it may not be easy to change and transform the national identities already constructed, because the social system may be seen as a solid and objective reality by the exiting actors (Zehfuss, *Constructivism and identity*, 2006, p. 97). Identities are formed by the interactions of the actors with their social environment along with the characteristics they possess. Identity construction consists of a process in which the internal and external discursive practices are developed together. These discursive practices attribute a meaning to events, persons, policies, and states (Doty, *Sovereignty and the Nation* 1996, p. 127). The construction process is a political process and national identities are formed by national and international political processes and conflicts (Katzenstein 1996, p. 5). According to the constructivist approach, since power means the authority determining common meanings, establishing the identities, interests, and state practices, the social forces shaping the national identity acquire authority on this identity as well (Adler 1997, p. 336).

### ***Diaspora and Bilateral Relations***

Overlapping of the state boundaries and nation is expected for the formation of national identities (Doty, *Sovereignty and the Nation* 1996, p. 127). These expectations are unlikely to meet exactly.

If there are groups thought to be belonging to the same nation living abroad, overlapping of the borders and the nation would never exist. Namely Diaspora is physically outside of the boundaries of state, but fully within the state in terms of certain aspects. Diaspora may be more influential than the people living within the boundaries of the country in the formation process of the national identities. In this sense, Diaspora is physically outside the country, but is inside in terms of identities. The influence of Diaspora on the national identity can exist within the frame of material gains. However, the most important demand of Diaspora is acquiring, strengthening, and sustaining a self-image. When it comes to foreign policy, it is seen that dynamics of national identity may be activated and formed by international images manipulated by various players such as governments and Diaspora (Bloom 1990, pp. 79-81). From the outset of the process of the formation of identities, the perception regarding identity would be substantial on the decision making process of foreign policy. Since Diaspora is in an international position, it would not lose its role of being a non-governmental actor. The constructivist theory makes it easier to understand and explain the identity-based activities of Diaspora. Diaspora in foreign policy has the motivation and opportunity of being influential on formation and perception of identities. The fundamental aim of motivation may be to fit and sustain the self-image and to transfer it to next generations. There are some certain preliminary conditions for Diaspora to influence decision-making processes. First of all, Diaspora is required to have a motivation to be influential. Secondly, Diaspora should be capable of influencing foreign policy. Such kind of capability arises mainly from the opportunities of organizing the Diaspora community in a host state allowing such organizations. Another important factor is the requirement of the home state's openness to the effects of the Diaspora and conducting an internal policy enabling the intervention of Diaspora (Shain and Barth 2003, p. 462).

Diaspora may be divided into various sub-groups and acting based on different ideologies. A great number of diversity of the groups can lead to some problems for Diaspora in producing policies toward home state. In fact Diaspora is required to be influential on the foreign policies of both home state and host state. A wide range of diversity in the Diaspora may be an obstacle to this situation. However, as seen in the Armenian and Jewish diasporas, which are the most influential and significant ones, it must be noted that combining within the framework of certain motives and a common idea and create consistent policies towards the home state. (Shain and Barth 2003, p. 463).<sup>2</sup> The political regime of the host state is the basic factor determining the attitude and policies towards the home state. The policy making process is determined by the political system and democratic freedoms of the host state allowing multiculturalism, interest groups and lobbies. For instance the USA allows to form interest groups and diasporas become strong lobbies capable of influencing foreign policy decisions of the USA toward Armenia, Turkey or Israel. Non-democratic regimes may not allow establishing non-governmental organizations or pressure groups and activities of them for expressing different ethnical and religious identities. Even if a non-democratic regime permits organizations of Diaspora, it may tend to direct them to produce policies of the regime may hinder freedoms in decision making process.

The nature of the regime of the host state is clearly important for Diaspora to become an active group, but it is not sufficient. The ministry of foreign affairs of the host state should also be ready for taking Diaspora into the consideration in foreign policy. Furthermore, the foreign policy of the host state should be significant and have a potential to effect the home state of Diaspora. At the same time, if home state is open to an outside intervention or dependent on another state politically or economically, Diaspora may become more willing to effect and able to effect foreign policy of home state. The effectiveness of Jewish and Armenian Diasporas living in the USA on the decision-making mechanisms of the USA towards Israel and Armenia is an example of this situation. The internal policy of Diaspora's home state, domestic issues and the nature of the home state's regime are important as well. As seen in the Armenian example, the nature of Armenia as a state passing through a process that seeks to harmonize the country's political institutions with the international system, the economic problems of the country, needs for economic aids from Diaspora, and its problems with the neighbors make it open to the influences from Diaspora. In addition, Diaspora is perceived as a part of the Armenia in terms of Armenian national identity. The recognition of genocide is the core of Diaspora's national identity and the governments of Armenia is very sensitive and open to the demands of Diaspora. Besides, it is the basic matter that determines the Armenia and Turkey's bilateral relations in the eyes of Diaspora.

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<sup>2</sup> The Chinese Diaspora has a different nature compared to these two diasporas and does not try to intervene the foreign policy issues.

## **Conclusion**

It seems difficult to come to a compromise or solution in relations between Armenia and Turkey, because a bilateral relation even has not been started yet. One of the most important reasons for not initiating the relations between the two countries is the national identities based on the past and foreign policies regardingly. Both sides, especially Turkish side, underestimate each other's pain and are seeking justification grounds for the violations of their own. They are acting in a manner as if cherishing the memory of the losses is only possible by being a party like supporting a football team. Instead of grieving for each sad event experienced in these lands, an atmosphere like whose pain is the greatest is created. This atmosphere is dominant in the social bases of the both sides, in the national educations' curriculums, and even worse, in the academic literature. Even if the bilateral relations begin, it is not possible to continue communication without significant changes. How quickly the dialogue initiated by Abdullah Gül and Sarkisyan began and ended is a good example of this situation. Reconciliation is a process which is different from resolution, while containing the resolution as well, but requiring taking further steps (Whittaker 1999, pp. 1-9). Establishing actual peaceful relations between the communities on a regional basis can only be achieved by achieving reconciliation. Reconciliation is not just composed of political arrangements in order to reduce the hostility and the causes of conflict, but it is an approach effective on the level of tolerance, change in attitude, and the psychological processes. While conflict resolutions start with negotiations or mediation attempts by third parties, reconciliation is a process including these, but also requiring questioning the identities adopted by the communities in the internal and foreign policies. It is possible to initiate and maintain permanent, long-lasting, and peaceful relations only after these initiatives. The type of reconciliation is also important. Minimum-level reconciliation emphasize only on legal aspects and human rights. But, maximum-level reconciliation processes correspond to a healing process including the expression of the grief of both sides and mutual forgiveness (Verdeja 2009, p. 12-27). It is clear that both choices are tough.

The point emphasized by Verdeja, Ackerman, and Staub in a similar manner is that "continuous mourning" does not contribute to reconciliation. Therefore, it is required to remember the events, but the emphasis should be on common projects and policies and positive relations. Otherwise, as Ackerman states, a remembering and commemoration process emphasizing only mourning would have a "consuming" impact on the moral capital. However, this capital, according to the author, should be used to educate the community for the rule of law and human rights throughout the country (Ackerman 1992, p. 72). Any type of reconciliation would require mutual recognition. However, pre-conflict identities must be no longer valid throughout the post-conflict process and new identities must be built instead in order to provide peaceful relations between the two countries in the long term. The pre-conflict identities are the identities in which the humanitarian values of individuals are lost for both the victim and the perpetrator. Continuing these identities after the conflict and transferring to next generations lead to an endless hostility.

When it comes to foreign policy between Turkey and Armenia, issues related to past, the events of 1915 and the national identities developed based on these factors come to the fore rather than current events or needs. Establishing positive relations may be possible for both communities by starting to question the national identities and national interests which were constructed along with the past. According to the constructivist theory, since identities can be constructed through bilateral relations and communication, new identities can be built instead of the old and negative ones. Initiation of mutual communication is the preliminary condition for differentiating the existing excluding identities. Furthermore, if a mutual communication is initiated, not only the Armenia's the foreign policy, but also the effectiveness of Diaspora on the foreign policy of Armenia should be taken into account. The factual approaches might be opening of borders, establishment of commercial ties, political negotiations, establishment of joint commissions, and peace messages transmitted within the discourses of the media, Diaspora, and the leaders. The point which will contribute the long-term peaceful approaches is the alteration of the national education curriculums and official historiography of both countries. It is very important to convey peaceful messages not only towards the Armenians or Turks, but also towards all people and groups mainly in the region and in the world. The use of a tolerant language not excluding other groups is very significant as well. The politicians and elites of both communities are required to think about the perception of "the other", "the enemy" and the national identity. It should not be forgotten to change the problematic language of official histories of both communities. It is necessary to take steps to fulfill legal arrangements based on human rights.

All non-governmental organizations and media institutions are required to contribute to a new peaceful atmosphere. It is significant to be patient knowing how hard to achieve this goal under the conditions of the present day.

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