

# Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan's Non-Apologies to the Armenians and Kurds

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FATMA MÜGE GÖÇEK, JUL 7 2014

On 23 April 2014, one day before the 99<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan issued a message through the Internet, delivering his condolences to the grandchildren of the victims of the Armenian genocide. He stated that great pain was experienced during World War I, that understanding and sharing this pain was a duty of humanity, and that what was experienced in 1915 had to be investigated. [1] Was this an apology? If it was, it was certainly different in tone from his prior 23 November 2011 apology to the Kurds for the massacres they suffered. [2] In the latter context, he referred to the debate he had with the opposition leader Kılıçdaroğlu over the Dersim massacres while delivering a speech to the city leaders of his party; he disclosed four official documents to demonstrate the opposition party's culpability, and then concluded by stating that he apologized on behalf of the Turkish state since the opposition leader whose party was responsible failed to do so. This article briefly reviews the apology literature, articulates what a successful apology ought to contain, and then discusses the Armenian and Kurdish cases to argue that neither of the statements comprised an apology.

### Why is an Official Public Apology Pertinent Now?

Alice MacLachlan defines [3] an official political apology as one "offered by political representatives or heads of state, on behalf of a political body or state, for wrongs committed in the recent or the distant past." Hence an apology's three subjects comprise the political actor making the apology, i.e. the apologist, the actor on whose behalf the apology is made, i.e. the perpetrator, and the actor who has suffered the wrongdoing, i.e. the victim. Why and how is an apology effective? An apology, Martha Minow elucidates, [4] is paradoxical in nature in that it cannot undo what was done, and yet "in a mysterious way and according to its own logic, this is precisely what it manages to do." What is this mysterious need for an apology? Eviatar Zerubavel provides [5] a plausible answer by demonstrating that the acknowledgment of wrongdoing and ensuing apology help restore our trust in the goodness of humankind. It thus enables us to keep living on with hope rather than in constant despair. And it is especially significant to point out that this is the case not only for the victims to whom the damage done is already beyond comprehension, but also for the perpetrators. Perpetrators who deny past wrongdoing lose their moral compass due to their lack of accountability, always engaging in self-destructive behavior as a consequence. The persistence of denial also undermines contemporaneous confidence and trust [6] in state and government institutions and in assuming civic responsibility. As a consequence, democracies that draw their legitimacy from claiming to represent all their citizens equally need to continually ensure that wrongdoing against particular social groups is always addressed and corrected.

Yet one could argue that this has always been a prerogative of democracies. So why did the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries in particular turn into what is often termed the era of apology? Among many scholars, Elazar Barkan points out [7] the end of the Cold War as the major factor; with the end of the USA-USSR political rivalry that polarized the world and prioritized the realpolitik of national interests, moral responsibilities and reflection on past historical injustices moved to the forefront of the political agenda. John Torpey articulates [8] the emerging global consensus regarding apology in terms of the expansion of the human rights discourse throughout the world; political actors started to actively engage in the rectification of wrongdoings in their own societies as a consequence. And increased worldwide communication through the internet also helped diffuse not only the human rights discourse, but the spectrum of ensuing apologies that were then actively compared, criticized and debated. [9]

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## **What Comprises a Successful Apology?**

Alice MacLachlan identifies [10] five elements that make up a successful apology. First, one needs to identify the acts of wrongdoing, acknowledging them as wrong, bad, harmful, and injurious; second, one needs to articulate the wrongdoer, taking responsibility for their acts; third, one has to recognize the wronged party, discussing in detail how they suffered and how the apology addresses that suffering; fourth, one has to clearly describe why the committed act was wrongful, expressing remorse, regret, and shame in the process; and fifth, one has to commit to a future where there would no longer be the necessity to make similar apologies by clearly stating what necessary measures will be taken next. Hence, succinctly put, the acknowledgment of the act, the responsible actors, and the injured parties leads to disavowal, assumption of responsibility and expression of regret, ending with a commitment for repairing the wrongs by fully articulating future measures to be taken. It is thus crucial that the intent of an apology is not a mere gesture committed to coopt possible present and future pushback; one can often judge whether this is the case by the absence of commitment of any actual resources to prevent future incidents of prejudice, discrimination, and exclusion. [11]

Michael Marrus successfully summarizes [12] these into four elements as acknowledgment, acceptance of responsibility, expression of regret, and a commitment to reparation. He then discusses [13] six successful apologies. These are Western German Chancellor Willy Brandt's dropping to his knees in 1970 before the monument of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of 1943; Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's 1988 apology to the Japanese Canadians for their forced evacuation from the west coast and resettlement in other parts of the country; Chilean President Patricio Aylwin's presenting, in a televised broadcast to the nation in 1991, the 1350-page document he had had prepared documenting the terror of the Pinochet regime; American President Bill Clinton's addressing, in 1996, the survivors of the so-called Tuskegee syphilis study after a formal investigation, a Senate hearing, civil litigation, and an out-of-court settlement; again Bill Clinton's apology to the Rwandans, in 1998, for failing to intervene in a timely and appropriate manner to prevent the genocide of the Tutsi and moderate Hutu; and Danish Prime Minister Poul Nyrup-Rasmussen's apology, in 1999, to the Inuit of Thule, Greenland, for their forced relocation half a century ago, and doing so in the local Inuit dialect. The major characteristics that made these apologies successful were the non-verbal communication of regret expressed by Brandt's falling on his knees, verbal communication of Rasmussen employing the language of the victims, the careful official study prepared by Aylwin documenting the wrongdoing, and the personal expression of regret and shame to the victims by Mulroney and Clinton.

It is imperative to underline the significance in an apology of the tension between reason and emotion. The personal is especially important in expressing the emotional component of an apology. [14] This component has to be engaged at two levels, in relation to the person apologizing where they have to articulate, by employing the first person singular, the emotions of shame, regret, and sorrow that they personally feel. In addition, however, they also have to humanize the victims by identifying their painful range of emotions, not only during the wrongdoing, but also in its long and painful aftermath. Hence expression of the moral worth of victims is crucial. Only then can one elicit support from both the victims and the members of one's own group to start restoring the committed injustice. Failure to do so would confine the apology to a mere political statement with the intent to coopt the victim's expression of injustice, without any intent to redress and repair.

In ensuring the efficacy of the apology, it is also crucial to identify the role played by various professions within state and society that sustained the denial of the wrongdoing. [15] Hence apology's 'civil turn' necessitates the acknowledgment of wrongdoing and their passivity in redress by professional organizations like lawyers, doctors, and businesspeople, religious organizations, the military and security forces, and bureaucratic officials. Only then will the apology made by one political leader be fully embraced by the rest of society.

## **Why are Erdoğan's Statements Not Apologies?**

With this framework in mind, this paper now turns to the statement Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan made to the Armenians on 23 April 2014, comparing it in the process with his apology to the Kurds on 23 November 2011, the only other time when he apologized. First, following the insight of Nicholas Tavuchis [16] that the social context within which the statements are made should be taken into account in evaluating them, one needs to analyze why Erdoğan

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made the statements at particular junctures. In the Armenian case, he chose the date of one day before the 99<sup>th</sup> commemoration of the Armenian Genocide because of the impending centennial of the genocide and the possible domestic liberal and worldwide reaction condemning the official denial of any wrongdoing. Turkish public opinion is no longer unanimous in condoning the denial, making the political stand of the Turkish state and its government especially precarious. In the Kurdish case, the increasing politicization of the eastern provinces in prioritizing and promoting their Kurdish identity, and condemning the past massacres they were subjected to, play an important role. Kurds are no longer willing to renegotiate their place in republican Turkey without historical redress. Yet the governing and opposition parties differ in their policies regarding Kurdish political integration, so Erdoğan needed to bolster his party's stand. In addition, interestingly, the Armenian statement was delivered through the neutral, impersonal medium of the Internet, with no direct agency of the apologist present. The Kurdish statement was offered instead in a very carefully selected environment of the meeting of the city leaders of Erdoğan's own party. Hence both statements were carried out in controlled environments, neither medium presenting the opportunity for engaging, criticizing, or debating Erdoğan's statements.

## *Acknowledgment*

A successful acknowledgment documents the past wrongdoing, reframes official history, and takes a personal stand condemning the wrongdoing in the process. In his statement regarding the Armenians, Erdoğan reframes history by stating that "one cannot object [to the statement] that the last years of the Ottoman Empire was a difficult period filled with suffering for Turks, Kurds, Arabs, Armenians, and millions of other Ottoman citizens, regardless of their religion and ethnic origin." By clustering the Armenians suffering with those of all Ottoman citizens, he effectively coopts, equalizes, and relativizes the Armenian suffering, thereby obfuscating its genocidal nature. While many groups did indeed suffer, only the Armenians were permanently removed from their ancestral lands. Erdoğan dismisses the gravity of the Armenian suffering by stating that "establishing a hierarchy of suffering, comparing it to each other" serves no purpose. In the Kurdish statement, however, he acknowledges the past massacres of the Kurds by citing four official documents that demonstrate the state and government complicity in the violence. Still, in both instances, he carefully removes his own agency by assuming a neutral, official voice.

The apologist reframes history, but hopefully does so with the intent to redress the injustice. Yet in both cases, not only is there no intent to redress, but Erdoğan carefully removes himself and the emotions of anger, shame, and regret he should have felt. The only neutral declarations Erdoğan makes pertaining to the Armenian suffering are that "a just and moral stand necessitates all the pain lived within this period without regard to religion and ethnic origin," that "as our ancestors said, fire specifically burns where it falls," and that "it is a humane duty to understand and share that like all citizens of the Ottoman Empire, Armenians too should commemorate the memories of the pain they lived during that period." In all three instances, the extraordinary suffering of the Armenians leading to genocide is relativized, naturalized, and coopted by bringing in the suffering of all others. In the Kurdish case, Erdoğan cites in detail documents that reveal how unjust laws were passed and then put into action "to murder from air, land, with cannons and even gas bombs everything that moved in Dersim, women and children," "burning two innocent children, a teacher and inhabitants of an entire village... and murdering twenty children and two specific pious religious leaders [who are mentioned by name]." Hence, Erdoğan provides ample documentation for the Kurdish massacres that he does not in the Armenian case, even though there is just as much if not more documentation for the latter. Erdoğan may have done so in the Kurdish case to bolster the force of his subsequent attack on the opposition party as the culprit; in the Armenian case, however, he does not have a similar set target, except to acknowledge and take responsibility for the state and its governments that Erdoğan heads at the moment.

## *Acceptance of Responsibility*

In a successful acceptance of responsibility, the apologist carefully identifies the perpetrators and the victims, displays that both belong to the same moral terrain by expressing how both the perpetrators and victims suffered alike due to denial of wrongdoing, and then personally declares his sorrow, shame, and regret on behalf of the perpetrators. In identifying the perpetrators in the Armenian case, Erdoğan only passingly notes that

the events lived during World War I are the common pain of us all. It is humane and scientific responsibility to

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approach this painful history from the just memory perspective. That events such as deportations that produced inhumane consequences were lived during World War I when millions of people from all religions and nations lost their lives should not prevent the Turks and Armenians to establish common emotions and to exhibit reciprocal humane attitudes and behavior.

The only reference to the forced deportations and massacres committed by the Ottoman state under the Young Turk government that resulted in the deaths of 800,000 to 1.5 million Armenians not only barely mentions deportations, but relativizes the destruction by mentioning all other civilian and military deaths during the war. And the just memory perspective he advocates treats the Armenian suffering within the suffering of all others. Erdoğan then invites the victim Armenians to work as hard as the Turkish perpetrators in engaging in dialogue. So the imperative for redress falls not solely on the perpetrators as it should, but includes the victims as well.

In the Kurdish case, however, when discussing the perpetrators, Erdoğan does not hold back. He identifies in the documents, by name, the republican officer Muhsin Batur and the officials comprising President İsmet İnönü, Prime Minister Celal Bayar, Interior Minister Faik Öztürk, and Public Works Minister Ali Çetinkaya, for engaging in the massacres. Still, however, he does not take responsibility as the current Prime Minister of Turkey, but instead declares that the opposition "Republican People's Party (CHP) is the owner of this bloody creation," quickly adding on the complicity of CHP's local deputies at the time to bring the trajectory of blame onto the current CHP opposition leader. Hence, even when Erdoğan does identify the perpetrators, he refuses to take responsibility. And when he does eventually apologize, he does so in the following context:

[CHP opposition leader] Kılıçdaroğlu [who is from Dersim], where do you escape? How are you going to wriggle out of this? Will I apologize or should you? If there is the necessity to apologize on behalf of the state, if there is such a literature, I will apologize, [and] I apologize. Yet if there is the need to apologize on behalf of the CHP mentality, you do call yourself the new CHP leader.

Hence Erdoğan's intent here is not to accept responsibility himself, but to force the opposition leader to accept responsibility instead. What Erdoğan engages in is thus a political move. And interestingly, when Erdoğan does apologize, he does so not on behalf of the government he leads, but instead the state. Since the Turkish state is headed by President Abdullah Gül, Erdoğan literally coopts Gül's authority in delivering the apology, removing the agency of his Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the process. In both cases, Erdoğan does not at all mention the laws of the republic until the present that sustained the wrongdoing, the republican governments that carried them out, and society at large that failed to condemn it.

In addition to identifying the perpetrators, a successful apology identifies the victims to whom the apology ought to be directed. In the Armenian statement, Erdoğan's first sentence reads: "24 April that carries a special meaning for our Armenian citizens and all Armenians of the world, provides a unique opportunity for freely sharing thoughts regarding a historical issue." His sentence identifies the historical issue of 24 April as only pertaining to the Armenians, thereby removing the interests of humanity, Turkish state, and the nation from the issue. And Erdoğan also eliminates himself from the issue as well by withdrawing his agency through using an indirect verb. When he does refer to the Armenians, he always does so within the context of the similar suffering of all others, as I have noted above. And this is the case even when Erdoğan does finally express condolences in the third-person plural, rather than the first-person singular, as

with the hope and belief that the peoples of an ancient and peerless geography who share similar traditions could talk about their past maturely, that they would mourn their losses collectively in befitting ways, we wish that the Armenians who lost their lives under the conditions of the early twentieth century would rest in peace, and we send our condolences to their grandchildren.

In the name of the Turkish state, Erdoğan does offer peaceful rest to the hundreds of thousands of Armenians that perished to remain forever nameless without a tombstone to mark their passing; he does also present condolences. But these are nevertheless qualified by how the state wants the impending commemorations to take place, that is, maturely, collectively, and in befitting ways. Of course, it would ultimately be the Turkish state and its government

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that will decide whether any commemorations would or would not meet these criteria, punishing those that fail to do so. Also, Erdoğan concludes his statement with a final sentence that "we also remember with respect and compassion all Ottoman citizens who lost their lives under similar circumstances whatever their ethnic and religious origin may be." Hence once again, the condolences to Armenians are delivered by relativizing the act of condolence by remembering all who perished during the same time.

The final component of the acceptance of responsibility necessitates giving agency to the victims; the apologist does not only have to state their pain and suffering, but also has to acknowledge that the victims should have been treated in the same manner with members of the dominant ethnic and religious group in society. Put another way, the apologist needs to express that the victim is no longer the 'other,' that the perpetrator and victim belong to the same moral universe, and that shared ethical values now necessitates not only the acknowledgment of wrongdoing, but also the acceptance of responsibility. Yet neither in case of the wrongdoing committed against the religiously different Armenians, nor the ethnically different Kurds, is there any indication that these two groups share common moral values and principles with the dominant Turks. Hence Erdoğan indirectly silences the hegemony of the Turks in defining and executing the rules of belonging, once again leaving the Armenians and Kurds marginalized, set apart from the Turks, except to commemorate with the latter, maturely, and under conditions set and judged by the latter.

## *Expression of Regret*

Apology politics has led successful politicians to become critically self-reflexive, making them willing to express their personal emotions often in person, sometimes in writing, thereby expressing their personal sorrow and shame. Erdoğan as a politician is known for being extremely emotional in his public speeches; these are directed at his Turkish audience at large, but only with the intent to engage those who voted for him and Muslim believers elsewhere in the world. Oddly, during the Armenian condolence, the text does not reflect any expression of emotions. Such lack of empathy is striking, but not unique. In other contexts, Erdoğan has demonstrated that he cares more and emotes more about murders during riots at other Muslim countries than murders taking place in his own country during protests; this is especially the case when the latter have secular, Kurdish, or Alevi identity. Erdoğan thus lacks the ability to empathize with those who do not belong to his group of Sunni Muslim voters in Turkey, and all Sunni Muslims elsewhere in the world.

Given this larger context, it is understandable why Erdoğan does not emote and empathize with the Armenians. The Kurdish apology is different, however. There, he specifically emotes and empathizes with three groups, namely women, children, and religious leaders. It is no accident that the first two have the least public agency, and the third has been discriminated against throughout republican history, a discrimination Erdoğan's party constantly reiterates to legitimate its rule. Who is missing in Erdoğan's empathy? Young Kurdish adults and mature, able-bodied Kurdish men and women. I would argue that he carefully silences these groups because they are still at the mountains as members of the PKK (Parti Kerkeran Kurdistan), still rebelling against the unjust rule of the Turkish government that Erdoğan heads. Hence, addressing the pain and suffering of all Kurds would have inevitably forced Erdoğan to confront the persistence of Kurdish pain and suffering after CHP rule, continuing into the last twelve years of AKP rule. And he studiously avoids this continuity of pain and suffering. In both cases, then, since Erdoğan does not belong to the same religious group as the Armenians or the ethnic group as the Kurds, his primary identity as a pious ethnic Turkish Sunni Muslim seems to prevent him from expressing any emotion or empathy to any group other than his own. Such an affectively exclusionary stand guarantees the failure of Erdoğan to ever approach, understand, acknowledge, and redress the sufferings of any group other than his own.

## *Commitment to Reparation*

A successful apology often concludes with the apologist announcing the specific measures that will be taken by the state and government for reparation. Such reparation is necessary because it secures the alleviation of wrongdoing from occurring in the future. As such, it does not, however, solely necessitate material or land compensation. Just as much, if not more significant, is the institution of social and political measures. Crucial in this context is inviting the opposition leader to join the apologist in seeing future action, through closely monitoring state and government institutions to hold them legally accountable if and when they still engage in discriminatory action, and getting civil

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society organizations including associations of physicians, lawyers, and businesspeople to participate in the apology. For after all, as Dipesh Chakrabarty points out, [17] there needs to be a cultural consensus in society to recognize past wrongdoing; even when such a consensus is realized, it will constantly face attack from those social groups intent on dissolving it. So a political leader needs to be vigilant in carrying through with an apology, serving as a model and monitoring its progress within state, government and society at large.

What does Erdoğan commit to in the Armenian case? He rearticulates what the Turkish state had dedicated to the reconciliation process in the past and, more importantly, then asks the liberal opposition in Turkey promoting the recognition of the Armenian genocide and the Armenian Diaspora living abroad for guarantees regarding their future behavior. "The spirit of the times necessitates the need to speak in spite of discord, attempt to understand the other through listening, evaluation of reconciliation attempts, and condemnation of hatred with the exaltation of tolerance and respect," Erdoğan states, thus declaring that contemporaneous pressures rather than domestic necessity or collective soul searching have forced him to engage in this public act. "Our initial invitation to form a joint history commission in order to scientifically research the 1915 events" still persists, he continues, thereby presenting his one and only reparation, one that had been previously made without success. Such a history commission was not favored because the intent of the Turkish state in establishing it was not to document what happened to the Armenians in the past, but rather to relativize the Armenian suffering by presenting evidence on the suffering of all other groups. Hence Erdoğan's repetition of the reparation becomes dead on arrival.

Erdoğan then carefully delineates what the state expects from potential domestic political dissenters. He first defines the expression of "differing thoughts and views in Turkey regarding the 1914 events" as a necessity of multiculturalism, democracy, and modernity, and declares that the state is willing to tolerate such dissent. Yet Erdoğan also does not want some dissenters to subvert this free environment through engagement in "blame, offence and the voicing of provocative discourses and allegations." Thus the state Erdoğan represents is willing to tolerate dissent in so far as it occurs within the parameters drawn by the state. Then Erdoğan's focus turns onto potential dissenters and protestors outside Turkey. The shift is marked by the statement that "the employment of the 1915 events as an excuse to oppose Turkey and as an occasion to promote political conflict is unacceptable." Also unacceptable is the "extraction of animosity from history and the generation of new fights." Hence, once again, Erdoğan draws the impending boundaries of public discussion, articulating that any use of what is considered conflictual by the state will not be tolerated. Thus the condolence statement reads like the attempt of the Turkish state to define the rules of future discourse rather than to acknowledge past suffering.

There is no such mention of reparation in the Kurdish case. Since Erdoğan puts the entire blame for the wrongdoing against the Kurds on the shoulders of the opposition party, he probably expects them to commit to reparations alone. And since Erdoğan himself has been for years trying to promote the "Kurdish opening" by engaging in talks with local leaders, he possibly thinks what he has done is more than enough. Yet the reparation of such historical injustices not only takes decades, but necessitates Erdoğan's full commitment on all fronts, including sharing, as the current Prime Minister, the responsibility of the Kurdish massacres with the opposition party. Not only is Erdoğan not aware of the complexity of an apology then, but he does not engage in delivering apologies to either the Armenians or the Kurds. Judging by his political performance so far, Erdoğan lacks the vision to issue an apology to any social group other than what he considers to be his own, Sunni Muslim believers. Finally, the success of an apology is also defined by the strength of the public response; the lukewarm responses of the Armenian state and Kurdish and Armenian social groups reveal that Erdoğan's statements were merely political statements, not apologies.

## Notes

[1] <http://bianet.org/bianet/print/155179-basbakan-dan-1915-torunlarina-taziye>

[2] <http://bianet.org/bianet/print/134241-basbakan-dersim-icin-ozur-diliyorum>

[3] MacLachlan 2013: 185-6.

[4] Minow 1998: 114.

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[5] Zerubavel 2006.

[6] See Andrieu 2009 for a fuller discussion of the significance of trust.

[7] Barkan 2000: x, xvi-xvii.

[8] Torpey 2003: 1-3.

[9] See Morris-Suzuki 2005 for a fuller discussion.

[10] MacLachlan 2013: 188-195; see also Lazare 2004 and Tavuchis 1991.

[11] Cunningham 2004: 80-81.

[12] Marrus 2007: 79; see Tirrell 2013 for a more detailed discussion of the Rwandan case.

[13] *Ibid.*, 81-5, 92, 97-8.

[14] Augoustinos et al. 507-8.

[15] Fette 2008: 84-95.

[16] Tavuchis 1991.

[17] Chakrabarty 2007: 78; see Walker 2013 for a fuller discussion of the complexity of reparations.

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