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War in the media - Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict driven by hatred and atrocities

Professor Dr. Anahit Khosroeva teaches at North Park University in Chicago, is an expert on genocide research, and habilitated at the National Academy of Science in Armenia in 2003 on the topic of the genocide of the Assyrians, entitled: "The Assyrian Massacres in the Ottoman Turkey and on the Turkish Territories of Iran (late 19th - the first quarter of the 20th century). Excerpts can be found via the following link - ["Assyrian Massacre in the Ottoman Turkey and Adjacent Turkish Territories"](#).

Related to the borderline conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, with the territory known as "Nagorno Karabakh" as the central point of conflict, which was historically settled by Armenians, also a digital conflict manifested itself in the social media. It seems that this conflict was especially influenced by religious-nationalist ideas and intentionally triggered with memories of the genocide of Christians in the Ottoman Empire (1915-1918). Looking at the extremely martial rhetoric in the media, it seems obvious that the narrative of the "Armenian" as subhuman is propagated, especially driven by the fascist view of Pan-Turkish nationalists such as the "Grey Wolves", in order to intimidate and demoralize the opponent. Protagonists deliberately refer to the genocidal murder of Christian Armenians, Assyrians, Arameans, Chaldeans, Pontos Greeks, etc. in the Ottoman Empire in order to create the impression that the nearly full annihilation of any Christian ethnic culture in the former Ottoman Empire is now being completed. In the media, both recordings of drones exported by Turkey to war zones and a strong presence of various trolls in social media, are used to fuel the conflict.

With Professor Dr. Anahit Khosroeva, a native Armenian and ethnically half Assyrian, we talk about the impact of fascist and nationalist ideas, which connect the history of the genocide of Christians in the Ottoman Empire with the current developments in Nagorno-Karabakh becoming a digitally toxic mixture, which also reaches and divides the European society. Especially when it comes to dealing with fascist ideologies that originate from the mindset of German citizens with a Turkish or Middle Eastern background and which are becoming a serious danger.

Dr. Khosroeva – How do you feel as an Armenian, how do you feel as a Christian?

I am often asked this question, and every time I am amused because in Armenia, where I grew up and spent most of my life, over 99% of the population are Christians. I think this is something that makes Armenia unique. For me, being a Christian with a maximum of religious freedom, which every Christian can dream of, does not mean following rules and regulations, performing rituals or even going to church. It means much more. Maybe it's because I grew up in the Soviet Union, where religion was mostly prohibited. The first time I went to church was in my teens, and I wasn't baptized until I was 25..

For me, as a Christian, it is mainly about a friendship that is based on a connection with Jesus Christ. And about the characteristics of Christianity, in the meaning of being God-fearing and humble. Christians should reveal the fruit of the Spirit given to them in [Galatians 6 Paul's letter from the Bible to the Galatians](#) - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control.

Would there have been any other solution to solve the conflict, except the current agreement between Armenia, Russia and Azerbaijan?

This is the most difficult question of all because there is so much to say about the situation, but I try to keep it short. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is not new, but it started in 1988, when the Karabakh region was part of the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan, just before it collapsed. Most people living in this area belonged to the Armenian ethnicity and expressed their wish to leave the Azerbaijani Republic. At the beginning of the war, the Soviet Union was alive and well, but by the end of the war in 1994, Armenia and Azerbaijan were two independent states. Unfortunately, no other country recognized Nagorno-Karabakh as an independent territory. The first ceasefire agreement between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia, representing the [OSCE Minsk Group](#), was concluded in 1994 and called the "[Bishkek Protocol](#)." The protocol should remain in place with no expiry date until a final agreement could be reached. However, a new agreement that could have secured peace or at least a cease-fire was not reached before war broke out last year.

But let's turn to the question of why the conflict has started again. From the Armenian perspective, the area is called Artsakh and was traditionally and historically one of the 15 Armenian heartlands, mainly inhabited by Armenians. Basically, we consider it as our ancestral

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homeland. After the first [Armenia – Azerbaijan War \(1994\)](#) Armenia has conquered territory in Azerbaijan, which can be assigned to Armenia in the historical context, but which is considered “occupied” territory according to international law. This is related to Stalin's decision in 1921, when the Communists granted autonomy to the Armenians in what is now Nagorno Karabakh, but [incorporated the territory into the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan](#). A fateful decision, fueling the current conflicts. Armenia's hope and strategy was to wait for Nagorno-Karabakh to be recognized as an independent region.

The current conflict is another one, and it differs from the previous clashes because from the very beginning, the NATO member Turkey was involved in the planning, conception, and realization. An aggravating factor is that our new Government, which was established after the “revolution” in 2018, is organized inside the context of a parliamentary democracy. Due to this, the newly elected prime minister, without any experience in military structures or war missions, was considered to be the commander-in-chief of the army. This may be standard practice for European politicians. But especially in a high-conflict region like the Caucasus, wedged between hostile countries, military experience is of primary importance. All presidents before were familiar with Nagorno-Karabakh and grasped the intricacies of the extremely complex situation. Many senior politicians in the previous administration were veterans of earlier conflicts and accordingly experienced in military matters. Academics like myself warned about the upcoming war because the reason of the conflict, as I mentioned earlier, is located in the past and had not been solved yet. Also, Armenia's economic growth was limited due to a lack of resources and it is still suffering from the outbreak of the war today. But the government did not listen and ignored all our warnings. As a consequence, the people were not ready and not sufficiently prepared for this conflict, if one can be prepared at all.

In my opinion, our Prime Minister betrayed his own people; based on the fact that throughout the whole war, the government conveyed that we were winning and provided us false information. Later, the political leadership conveyed that, they were aware of losing the war just a few days after it started. This raises the question of why our prime minister was not aware of this right from the beginning. Why didn't they tell us the truth? Maybe we would have been prepared better, emotionally and socially, if we had been treated honestly. In fact, it has to be said that our own government told us lies.

Unfortunately, I worry that the conflict will continue. We have to decide whether to reclaim the territory or accept the current status.

How was the media involved in the conflict and is the conflict continuing in the media?

First of all, I am surprised that the international media reported barely on the situation. How can it be that in a highly digitalized and eminently media-saturated world, hardly anyone is talking about this conflict? It almost seems as if no one cared. Azerbaijani media were instructed not to report during the war, which was a good idea. Ordinary media should not be dragged into a conflict without knowing the full facts. In contrast, the Armenian media reported on casualties and damages every day, but it turned out that the news from the Armenian side were not always truthful. Facts were not presented correctly. But I cannot blame the media. They were given the information they disseminated directly by the respective departments of the government. As a consequence of the painful defeat, the Armenian people want the government to step down. That is the reason why many demonstrations are taking place in the country. But so far the prime minister could not be convinced to resign. By the way, this is one of the main topics of media coverage at the moment.

Is there evidence that members of the Azerbaijani military have committed human rights violations and shared them on social media?

Yes, there are videos on social media that clearly show human rights violations. They did not only torture people, but also used biological weapons. [For instance, Amnesty International reported on it](#)

Does this apply to members of the Armenian military as well?

So far, I have not seen any evidence for such assertions. And frankly speaking, I don't believe that Armenians who adhere to Christian values and call themselves Christians would do such atrocities. But, of course, the Azerbaijani propaganda claims the opposite.

How much do such actions and the spreading of such content poison the already difficult relations between the parties?

There is no doubt that such intentionally disseminated videos and human rights violations, especially spread on social media, just fuel the conflicts even more..

Are inhumane crimes, such as the ones possibly committed by members of the Azerbaijani military, part of an ideology that could be related to the genocide of Christians in the Ottoman Empire?

This is one of my main subjects, about which I have already stated several times, in various forms, always based on scientifically proven work. At the end of the 19th century [Sultan Abdul Hamid II of the Ottoman Empire](#) had 300 thousands Armenian and 55 thousands Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac Christians being killed. During the First World War (1914-1918) over 2 million Christian minorities of the Ottoman Empire were killed by the ruling Young Turks' government. This [genocide](#) was against Armenians, Assyrians and other Christian minorities. Even today, Turkey, as the successor of the Ottoman Empire, refuses to admit that this mass murder was a [genocide](#).

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At the same time, Turkey and Azerbaijan have a strong military, economic, ideological and cultural relationship. We Armenians call Azerbaijanis the younger brother of the Turks. The language is also very similar. Erdoğan expressed that the two countries are one nation of two states. In recent years, Turkey has intensively supported Azerbaijan and encouraged the government in Baku to become more proactive - especially in the context of Nagorno-Karabakh. After the outbreak of the military conflict in July 2020, Turkey supported Azerbaijan heavily at various levels. For example, two Turkish F16 jets guarded the Azerbaijani airspace. They also supported Azerbaijani troops in military training, exported modern weapons to the country, in particular strategically important drone technology. Azerbaijan is of geopolitical and strategic importance to Turkey's energy stability, as well as an important investor supporting Turkey's struggling economy. Erdoğan aims to build a greater Turkey. His foreign policy is based on the idea of neo-Ottomanism, pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism. Pan-Turkism is a nationalistic ideology believing that all Turkic-speaking people in all parts of Asia are one unique nation.

At the same time, neo-Ottomanism is a religiously based ideology where all Turkish speaking people should be united. Both ideologies share the same goal, which is a "new great Turkey." Erdoğan wants to be, figuratively and historically, the sultan of this new great Turkey. All people who stand in opposition to this ideology either leave the country or are imprisoned. Those who follow this ideology consider Christians, anchored in a nationalist-religious worldview, to be their enemy.

[At a symposium on "Human Rights in Turkey"](#) some time ago, the Middle East expert and journalist Simon Jacob gave a geopolitical lecture about this, explaining in more detail the connections between Turkish expansion policy, technological - military development, digitalization, nationalist - Islamic fascism and events in the past. The entire lecture is available with [this link as a video](#) on the website of a human rights organization as well as Mr. Jacobs [comprehensive and interesting power point presentation](#) in pdf - format.

Also interesting is the report [„EASTERN EUROPE - Azerbaijan and Turkey's genocidal assault against Armenians“](#) at the website [„moderndiplomacy“](#). Also interesting is the report "EASTERN EUROPE - Azerbaijan and Turkey's genocidal assault against Armenians" at the website "moderndiplomacy", which deals with the topic objectively and factually.

How close is the ideology of extremist groups such as ISIS?

In my opinion, the Turkish government has deployed extremists in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. During the Karabakh war, Turkey mobilized about 4,000 former jihadists from Syria and other countries to fight against Armenia. This is a major problem, as it was no longer just a conflict between two countries, but became a trans-regional conflict after extremist groups were involved. But Ankara, of course, denies the fact that Islamist-inspired militiamen have been deployed. At the same time, this is also a problem for Russia, as more jihadists are entering to Dagestan via the Caucasus and contributing the expansion of Islamism.

For example, Turkey and the "IS" have much in common in terms of their ideology. The "Islamic State" is a Sunni jihadist group with a very brutal ideology that claims religious dominance on the Muslim community. Therefore, both groups try to get control over a certain territory to establish their own state, which is governed through their radical ideologies. It could be said that the pan-Turkish nationalists are a modern version of IS with more sophisticated technology and weapons - regardless of the fact that Shiites dominate Azerbaijan whom the IS religiously considers apostates and combats.

How strong is the effect on the Caucasus and Europe in this context?

When IS destroyed Christian Assyrian villages near the [Khabour Valley](#) in 2016, I told people on Armenian television that this was a problem in Syria at the moment, but sooner or later it could become a problem all over the world. I was given little credence in 2016 and it simply was unbelievable that extremist groups such as the IS could reach our region. But unfortunately, I was right. Based on Erdogan's threat to stability in the Caucasus, he is playing with Europeans' concerns about refugees at the same time. He also causes a split in France, when he is talking about Islamophobia, for example, and thus trying to incite citizens of Turkish origin and encouraging them to turn to terror. Related to this is the problem that Europe is trying to be more liberal and open to refugees, but in my opinion they are getting into a cultural conflict with them. Europe has difficulties in integrating them into the culture of the country they seek protection. Integration often fails bringing the above-mentioned problems, which leaders like Erdogan use for their own benefit.

One last question: Do you see a similarity between the ideology of IS and nationalists like the group of so-called "Grey Wolves"?

The ideology of the Grey Wolves highlights Turkish history by insisting on its glory days and instrumentalizing events such as the founding of the first Turkish states in Central Asia to form the idea of a purely "Turkish Race". At the same time, the concept of the Turkish nation is linked to religion, Islam, as an ideal. The ideology of the "Grey Wolves" is based on the "superiority idea" of the Turkish race and the Turkish nation. A "...striving for an "ideal" Turkish nation, which they define as Sunni Islamic and mono-ethnic: inhabited only by "true" Turks. A Turk is anyone who lives on Turkish territory, feels Turkish, and calls himself Turkish."

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Similarly, the IS promotes religious violence and considers Muslims who disagree with its interpretations as infidels or apostates, and there are very many of them; including Shiites in Azerbaijan. Such symbolism, similar to that of the "Grey Wolves," is meant to resurrect past glory, whether it is the "Caliphate" (IS) or the "Ottoman Empire" (Grey Wolves, nationalists)

Accordingly, there are many similarities, but also differences. Both are ultra-nationalist, Islamist and neo-fascist groups. For example, the Grey Wolves were also involved in the first Karabakh war. Members of the Grey Wolves fought on the side of Azerbaijan. For example, [a picture of a parade in Azerbaijan](#) after the victory shows a General of the Azerbaijani army giving the "wolf salute" - the distinctive identifying sign of the "Gray Wolves", now banned in France but allowed in Germany. [The Armenian radio station reported about that.](#)

The significant difference between the ideologies is that the IS is a religiously motivated group. The Grey Wolves are motivated by Turkey's history and the idea of the pure "Turkish Race". But both of them usurp the same brutality, religiously justified, in order to use violence and spread as much fear and terror as possible.

In this context, it should be mentioned that the leader of the Turkish Nationalist Movement Party, or MHP for short, and coalition partner of the AKP, considers the Grey Wolves to be part of the MHP and more than shares its ideology. Recently, their chairman, Devlet Bahçeli (MHP) announced to start building a nationalist school in Shushi (the city in Nagorno Karabakh, which was captured by Azerbaijan on November 9th, 2020).

According to Turkish Daily News "Hurriyet", Devlet Bahçeli said that both President Erdogan and President Aliyev approved his proposal to build the school in Shushi. They laid the cornerstone for this school on January 30th, 2021. I am sure that this was an ideological and symbolic act to demonstrate power.

Ms. Khosroeva, many thanks for these interesting information and your time.

Simon Jacob, Valentin Hoffmann

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