

"I, as an ethnically Turkish citizen, am not guilty, but am responsible for what happened to the Armenians in 1915."



Toronto, Canada – Dr. Fatma Müge Göçek, Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, and the author of many books and articles, gave an eye-opening and provocative public lecture on “Turkey, the European Union and the Armenian Question,” and in that context, discussed the significance of the recent Istanbul conference on “Ottoman Armenians during the Decline of the Empire: Issues of Scientific Responsibility and Democracy.”

The event took place on Dec. 2, 2005 and was organized by the International Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies (A Division of the Zoryan Institute). Varouj Aivazian, Prof. of Economics at the University of Toronto and Chair of the Institute’s Corporate Board introduced the event by stating why the Institute created this evening’s forum. He highlighted that Prof. Göçek simultaneously has both incurred the ire of her compatriots and earned their respect and admiration for her stand on the Armenian Genocide, her role in advising the organizers of the Istanbul conference, and her participation in it.



Prof. Göçek prefaced her remarks with a statement that she was not receiving any payment for her appearance, nor does she accept payment for any of her invited lectures on this subject. She made that point emphatically, as she has been accused recently of speaking out in a manner opposing the Turkish state thesis on the Armenian Genocide only for financial consideration.

Prof. Göçek stated that while she does not use the word “genocide” to refer to what happened to the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1915, she affirmed that “It certainly is so by the definition accepted by the United Nations.” She then very clearly explained that she has decided not to employ the term in her work, “because the term ‘genocide’ has become politicized by the Turkish state, as well as by certain segments of the Armenian Diaspora in such a manner that I think it hinders the discussion that needs to take place to get Turkish state and society...to understand what happened in 1915.”

Proceeding with a detailed historical outline of the Armenian Genocide and its denial, she discussed the importance of the recognition of the Genocide and reconciliation between Turks and Armenians. The relation between the Armenian Question and the Turkish state has gone

through stages, according to Prof. Göçek. The first stage was exploration, where the Armenian and official Turkish state versions were first delineated. Most of the world, except for Turkey, has accepted what happened to the Armenians as at least a massacre, if not a genocide. The Turkish state was able to sustain its position, however, due to cold war *Realpolitik*. People became polarized in two camps. She stated, “They judged you on whether or not you used the word ‘genocide’ and did not listen to anything else you had to say. This has impeded discussion on important questions, such as why the Genocide happened, so that we can learn to prevent it from happening again.”

The second stage she calls “the challenge stage.” As a result of improved economic, communications and educational development in Turkey, a climate was created for a challenge to state control over free speech and thought. The coming to power of the AK Party, in spite of strong nationalist opposition from within the state military and bureaucracy, comprised the political manifestation of this stage. The AK Party government emerged willing to ally itself on certain issues with the educated liberal forces of society that challenged the status quo. This was accompanied by increased efforts to have Turkey join the European Union, an endeavor that was ironically led by the religiously conservative but politically liberal AK Party government. They felt that the only way for their religiously based party to survive in secular Turkey was through EU membership, which would foster and strengthen democracy in Turkey. Hand in hand with this democratization goes Turkey’s ability to confront its past, which requires the diminution of the nationalist forces in Turkey.

The academic indicator of the “challenge stage” is the Istanbul Conference, where liberal intellectuals, who were willing to challenge the official discourse on the fate of the Armenians, discussed their positions. It was the nationalist forces that tried through various means to undermine and cancel the conference.

In her analysis of the significance of the Istanbul conference, Prof. Göçek explained that Turkish scholars were able for the first time to come together as a community in Turkey to challenge the official state discourse. She made clear that their opposition to the official state discourse does not in any way imply opposition to the existence of the Turkish state. The Turkish Republic should be proud, she insisted, that it has produced a group of scholars who are willing to criticize the state and society with the purpose of making it a better place for all of its citizens, regardless of their religion or ethnicity. She then added that what she and other intellectuals strove for was to make sure that there is public space in Turkey for everyone to make their views heard, regardless of whether or not they are critical of the state.

While the conference provided an opportunity to discuss various scholarly issues, she continued, contrary to the expectation and fears of some, it did not attempt to issue a resolution that genocide had taken place. That is not what academics do, she added. The purpose of the conference was to discuss and debate issues. The most significant presentations were those that emphasized the human dimension, which discussed the loss to the Turks caused by the departure of the Armenians. Furthermore, the conference participants were able to move away from the Turkish nationalist identity, which views the Armenian Diaspora as a

vast monolith. Finally, the conference helped them realize the extent of the fear inside Turkey, the lack of confidence and the lack of knowledge on the Armenian issue as a whole.

She described what scholars can do to help the situation. The most crucial thing, she urged, is that we develop a common language and a common body of knowledge....We have to make the Turkish public aware that recognition has to take place, not only because it is moral to do so, but it is also necessary for the democratization of Turkish society. The significance of this recognition is that the lack of it has sanctioned violence by the Turkish state against its own society. Turks have to understand what the cost of denial has been to them, both as a people and as a society. In this process, we have to take action against legal crackdowns both in Turkey—like those against Hrant Dink, Ragip Zarakolu and Orhan Pamuk—and in North America, where there is now a legal challenge against the Massachusetts educational authority.

As Prof. Göçek presented her conclusions, she stated that it is important to separate guilt and responsibility. “I, as an ethnically Turkish citizen, am not guilty, but am responsible for what happened to the Armenians in 1915. This is a crucial separation that has to be done for transformation.” In addition, she expressed that her ultimate aim is to make Turkey once more the common homeland of both Armenians and Turks, once again habitable by both, by granting Turkish citizenship and, therefore, right of return to all Armenians of Anatolian descent.



As Prof. Göçek’s speech captivated the audience with the force of her stand on the issues, Mr. Yonet C. Tezel, Counsellor of the Turkish Embassy in Ottawa, representing the Turkish Ambassador, His Excellency Mr. Aydemir Erman (who could not attend), asked to respond to her. In keeping with the principle of providing space for alternative points of view, as Prof. Göçek advocates, he was granted several minutes to make a speech of his own, even though the forum was purely academic. He began by observing that looking at the audience, it is difficult to tell who is Turk and who is Armenian and suggested that is the point of departure from which we should all take some inspiration. He then went on to state that the study of this period of history is on the rise in Turkey, and the people of Turkey are more aware of the seriousness of the accusation of genocide than ever before, and in that sense the Istanbul conference was important. “However, the people of Turkey do not feel they are the grandchildren of perpetrators of genocide,” he stated. He made this statement despite the fact that Prof. Göçek had already differentiated guilt and responsibility and also articulated that many of the perpetrators of the Armenian Genocide had joined Mustafa Kemal Atatürk to eventually become members of the first government of the Republic of Turkey. “I did an analysis of the Deputies of the first National Assembly,” she explained. “I have found enough documentation that implicates about 25-30% of the Deputies of having participated in the massacres against the Armenians....Not only was

there no accountability and no punishment for those who committed crimes against the Armenians, but many of the perpetrators unfortunately then became leaders of the Turkish Republic. Significant among these, for example, were people like Ismet Inunu and Celal Bayar...who came to occupy significant posts, such as either the President, Prime Minister, or Ministers of the new Republic.... So the perpetrators of the past became...the heroes of the present and the future, and this made it extremely difficult, I think, for Mustapha Kemal, who himself, actually, was chosen to lead the independence struggle, because he did not at all participate in any of these crimes.”

The Mr. Tezel also remarked, “I would caution against a dichotomy being drawn between the Turkish state and the civil society. Yes, there is a patrimonialism that is inherent from the Ottomans, but centre-peripheral relations are not enough to describe modern Turkey— certainly not in the last few decades. With all due respect for the EU, the EU does facilitate some of the liberalization, the reforms in Turkey. That’s all fine; that’s all welcome.”



“It is surprising to hear Mr. Tezel’s claim that there is no difference of view between the Turkish state and a significant element of civil society after the hour-long presentation on the subject by Prof. Muge,” said K.M. Greg Sarkissian, President of the Institute. “Mr. Tezel is forgetting the forceful public statements by social activists like Hrant Dink and Ragip Zarakolu, both facing trial for daring to speak differently from the state-sanctioned view. He is forgetting the criticism of scholars, like Fatma Müge Göçek, Halil Bektay, Murat Belge, and Taner Akcam, to name only a few.

He is also forgetting writers, like Elif Shafak and Orhan Pamuk, the most prominent of them, openly decrying the Turkish state’s suppression of freedom of speech.” Sarkissian then cited a statement by Pamuk from the London Times: “Although Turkey has made various ‘reforms’ concerning freedom of expression, sometimes it seems that these have been made for show and not out of conviction. I am a writer. It is humiliating to live in a country where this subject [the Armenian massacre of 1915-17] is a taboo and cannot be discussed.”

Then, His Excellency, Mr. Ara Papian, the Armenian Ambassador, asked for permission to speak. He stated that the Armenian Government has been waiting to see some indications of good will from the Turkish side, which has kept the border between the two countries closed and used its relations with a third country, Azerbaijan, to legitimate its decision not to have relations with Armenia. He emphasized that the Armenian state has never claimed territory or reparations from Turkey. Armenia's main goal, he insisted, is to establish better relations with Turkey. If Armenia wanted to make claims against Turkey, it would not have to do so through the Genocide, he explained, as there are bilateral and multilateral agreements that give Armenia the possibility to do so.



One of the highlights of the evening was that the audience included Armenians and Turks, as well as Alevis and Kurds, along with official representatives from both countries, who had been officially invited by the Institute. In this respect, Ms. Dicle Bilgin, one of the leaders of the Alevi community in Toronto, said, "One of the most important aspects of the evening was that Armenians, Turks, Kurds and Alevis were able to come together and discuss freely and openly a subject that is still taboo in Turkey." In describing her feelings about this event, she said, "I was very, very emotional to see that representatives from both embassies come together in this forum and talk. After all, without talking together, people can not come to any agreement."

One of the attendees, Ms. Junko Kanekiyo, a graduate student from Japan studying at the University of Toronto, expressed how fascinating it was for her to learn how the Turkish state denies the Armenian Genocide, just as the Japanese state denies its atrocities committed before and during World War II.

Mr. Murat Nisan, an Armenian from Turkey, stated that he was very pleased with the event, "even though the academic aspect of the lecture was impinged upon by the tensions introduced by the two political representatives, and the inherent emotional element that goes with that. Nevertheless," he explained, "because of the forum created by the Institute, for me this represented a dialogue between the two parties, both from the podium and through the questions and answers with the audience."

All present were touched by Prof. Göçek's message that we should not get caught up in the denial aspects of the Armenian Genocide, but rather learn what happened, so that we can understand how to prevent it from happening again. Furthermore, they were moved by her emphasis that while history and documents can be interpreted in various ways, the human suffering that took place in 1915 should not be overlooked or negotiated. She left them with the message that it is the scholar's responsibility to emphasize the human dimension, and that

we as humans should be morally responsible and share the suffering of others regardless of political considerations.



“Prof. Göçek’s speech and the rebuttal of the Turkish state representative in this public forum are a manifestation of what is going on in Turkey today,” said Greg Sarkissian. “There is a struggle between the dark forces of the “Inner State” of Turkey and the forces of

democracy. As part of that struggle, the democratic forces of Turkish society must regain control of its history. It is our hope that Turkey does join the EU, because I sincerely believe that it is for the benefit of both the Turkish and Armenian nations.”

George Shirinian, Director of the Institute, expressed gratification for the success of the evening. He observed that it was rare for Turks and Armenians to come together with their respective countries’ representatives and have a dialogue in such an open and constructive forum. He credited Prof. Göçek for being able, through her detailed and informative presentation, to lead the combined audience through this kind of dialogue, which has been taboo in Turkey up to now and a major obstacle to freedom of speech and thought. “I do hope,” he stated, “that Turks and Armenians together can continue the momentum for dialogue that was created here this evening.”

The International Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies (A Division of the Zoryan Institute) is committed to developing a new generation of scholars to engage in research and publication in the field of genocide and human rights studies. The institute seeks to help develop an academic-level educational support system for those who wish to work toward the prevention of genocide. The program strives to show, through the comparative study and sharing of the genocidal traumas of many peoples, that genocide is a universal human experience and that, as such, it must be the concern of all individuals and institutions.