



PERSPECTIVES

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Turkey's Selective Amnesia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Turkey exhibits a remarkably stubborn selective amnesia about its own history. The country claims the title of world's greatest friend to the Palestinians and most ardent champion of their cause, yet forgets that the Palestinians assisted both the Armenians and the Kurds in their bloody fights against Turkey.

The collective Turkish memory has clear perceptions of which nations are friends and which are foes. In Turkey, the average length of schooling is only 6.5 years, and most Turks have a minimal knowledge of history. The views of individual Turks very often align with those of family and friends. They are not avid readers by any means but love to debate, often hotly, at the neighborhood coffee shop about which foreign nations are friendly and which are not. An interest-based, transactional diplomatic calculus does not exist in the Turkish psyche.

Broadly speaking, there are six interpretations of historical events engraved in the Turkish collective memory that are employed to this day to justify hatred for specific foreign nations:

- Imperialist Europe caused the collapse of an otherwise perfect empire and then invaded what would become modern Turkey
- Ungrateful Arabs stabbed us in the back and allied with Western powers against our Ottoman ancestors
- The Greeks invaded Anatolia and committed horrendous war crimes during their military campaign
- The Russians, or the "reds in the north," have always had an eye on Turkish soil with a view to establishing a presence in the Mediterranean
- The Armenians, after having been loyal servants of the Ottoman Empire for centuries, revolted under Russian provocation for the sake of an

independent homeland and slandered the noble nation in the eyes of the world with the “genocide” hoax

- The Kurds, despite being fellow Muslims, launched the most violent terror campaign in Turkish history, with a death toll reaching over 40,000, including civilians.

There are inconsistencies in Turkish thinking—for example, the country has spent half a century trying to get into the EU while remaining convinced that Europeans are bloodthirsty, Islamophobic imperialists and racists—but they can be explained by a cultural pragmatism that overrides even deeply held historical stereotypes. This phenomenon was illustrated by a [survey](#) conducted by Istanbul’s Kadir Has University in 2016. The biggest group in the survey—18.8% of respondents—identified NATO/the US as the answer to the question “With which bloc should Turkey align its foreign policy?” But in the same survey, 44.1% of Turks cited the US as a threat to their country, classifying it as more dangerous than Russia.

To this day, Islamist/conservative/nationalist Turks are uniformly convinced that Europeans are colonialists; America is the cradle of imperialism; Russia is a creeping enemy; Greeks and Armenians are arch enemies; and autonomy- or independence-minded Kurds are terrorists. Yet there is a historical enemy curiously missing from the collective consciousness: Arabs and, specifically, the Palestinians.

Missing from Turkish memory I: WWI

Hussein bin Ali of the Hashemite family, the Ottoman-appointed (Arab) Sharif of Mecca, was the notional head of a WWI revolt against the Ottoman Empire, which he hoped to replace with a regional Arab kingdom under his leadership. Most of the Ottoman Empire’s Arabic-speaking subjects remained loyal to their sultan/caliph and viewed the insurrection with disdain. The revolt would not even have been launched without British (and, to a lesser extent, French) military support and lavish shipments of gold to buy Bedouin loyalty, and it ultimately played a negligible part in the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, the insurrection was immortalized in both local and Western historical memory as the “Great Arab Revolt,” largely due to the extraordinary PR skills of “Lawrence of Arabia,” a young British participant who almost single-handedly manufactured this fake historiographical narrative.

Decades later, in pursuit of his neo-Ottoman vision, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan would seek to reincarnate the fallen empire’s greatness by rejecting the conventional wisdom that [“the Arabs stabbed us in the back”](#) and claiming that the “Arabs and our Palestinian brothers helped us defeat the imperialist enemy.”

While this revisionist view was largely in line with historical fact, it failed to dent the standard pan-Arab [perception](#) of the Turks as longstanding brutal oppressors of the “Arab Nation.” In the words of Yasser Hareb, the Emirati producer of the 14-episode drama series *Kingdoms of Fire*, “the Arab world entered into darkness because of the Ottoman invasion.” In one episode of the program, Tuman Bay II, leader of the Mamluks in Egypt who fought an ultimately losing war against the Ottomans in 1517, said: “To every Arab: The unjust Ottoman enemy wants to invade our lands ... wherever those barbaric, butchering Ottomans enter an area they pillage its resources, kill its scholars, and enslave its people.”

Missing from Turkish memory II: ASALA

At its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s, the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) killed 46 people and injured 299 in 84 acts of attack and assassination. Of the victims, 36 were Turkish diplomats.

ASALA was founded by four men and consisted of only six or seven devoted militants during its embryonic years. The most active of the founders, Hagop Hagopian, who later became chairman, was half-Armenian and half-Arab. Hagopian once [worked](#) closely with Abu Iyad of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and [claimed](#) to be a member of that organization and a *mujahed*.

The PLO and its smaller but more radical faction, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), led by George Habash, provided generous training and logistical support to the ASALA. “An observer would notice the similarity in the tactics of the Armenian Secret Army and the Popular Front ... with which it has close ties,” began a 1982 interview with ASALA leaders. According to the interviewer, the journalist Claire Sterling, Habash had been “training his Armenian wards in Lebanon and South Yemen for years.”

On April 8, 1980, Habash’s PFLP organized a press conference for ASALA and the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) at a hideout in the ancient Casbah of Sidon, Lebanon. The 14 hooded ASALA representatives, protected by Palestinians, “emphasized their links with Marxist Palestinian formations.”

A detailed *Wall Street Journal* report stated that ASALA “trained with radical left-wing Palestinian groups (the PFLP and PDFLP) and sent more than 100 members through Fatah’s schools for foreign terrorists in Hamouriah, south of Damascus in Syria.” A high-ranking Turkish officer who had access to the testimony of some 43,000 Turks who had been detained after the Turkish military’s September 1980 *coup d’etat* told Sterling, “The Palestinians gave

training, aid, ammunition, and arms to leftists, rightists, Kurdish separatists and Armenians.”

Later, ASALA’s leader, Hagopian, would assert, “Many Armenians since 1966 participated in the Palestinian struggle from which they learned many things.”

They did indeed. There is evidence that “extremist [Palestinian] factions” collaborated with ASALA in its violent attack on the Ankara airport on August 7, 1982, which killed nine and injured 80. In that incident, terrorists opened fire at a crowded passenger waiting area.

Palestinian organizations also assisted ASALA with weapons, sabotage materials, counterfeit passports, and other [logistics](#), all of which were key elements in their asymmetrical war of the early 1980s.

Hagopian ultimately [broke](#) with the PLO in 1982 and allied his organization with Abu Nidal, the anti-PLO leader responsible for a great deal of anti-American terrorism.

Missing from Turkish memory III: PKK

PKK is the most violent terrorist organization in Turkish history. It is responsible for filling over 40,000 coffins since it started its armed campaign in 1984. The fighting still goes on today, in Turkish, Iraqi, and Syrian war theaters, with the death count rising every few weeks if not days.

The Turkish state broadcaster TRT’s October 16, 2019 document, “A timeline of the PKK’s war on Turkey: 1974-2019”, [notes](#) that in 1982, the PKK established its first military training camp in the Bekaa Valley of Syria “with the support of [the] PLO.”

Yet the Turkish Foreign Ministry’s webpage on “Turkey’s Political Relations with the State of Palestine” [reads](#): “Turkey established official relations with the PLO in 1975 and was one of the first countries to recognize the Palestinian State established in exile on 15 November 1988.”

Thus, for years after Ankara established relations with the PLO, the Palestinian organization would continue to be a staunch ally of two organizations that would cause a Turkish bloodbath. When the Palestinian-assisted PKK wave of terrorist violence was at its early peak, Turkey was priding itself as “one of the first countries to recognize the Palestinian State” — an entity that was contributing to the massacre of its people.

In 1982, even before they launched their campaign against Turkish military and civilian targets, 10 PKK militants fell while [fighting](#) “shoulder to shoulder

with the Palestinian resistance in Lebanon in the war against the Israeli invasion.”

In a 2018 interview, Mustafa Karasu, a founding member of the PKK, [said](#), “...we will never forget the support Palestinians gave to the Kurdish people in the 1980s ... [even] today we stand on the side of the Palestinians.”

Most recently, on April 15, 2020, Duran Kalkan, a member of PKK’s Central Committee, [summarized](#) it all: “The PKK leader since 1979 (Abdullah Öcalan, imprisoned in Turkey since 1999) had established relations with organizations linked to the PLO. PKK cadres played an active role in defending the Palestinian territories. Palestinians always wanted to have PKK militants on the front line in case of a possible Israeli invasion.”

Turks are not inherently masochistic. There must therefore be an alternative explanation for their persistent refusal to look squarely at the gaps and illogic in their version of the historical timeline. The Arabs allied with Western powers as they revolted against Ottoman Turkey. The Palestinians, whom Erdogan claims to support unreservedly, supported both the Armenians and the Kurds in their efforts to kill Turkish citizens. The Palestinian cause aims to annihilate Israel, a country that was once Turkey’s strategic ally.

If adoring the enemy of our enemies is not masochism, is it simply a self-inflicted amnesia based on Sunni faith and illusions of Ottoman grandeur?

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