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Lies in Turkish: a Response to Turkish Genocide Denial Dr. Racho Donef

This paper constitutes a response to a series of articles published in the Turkish daily *Hürriyet*, by Ozdemir Ince in 2003, under the titles of "Genocide and Sweden" and "Lies in Assyrian [Syriac]".

In this extraordinary series of 20 articles, Ince accuses perished Assyrians and Armenians of treason. According to this viewpoint it is the murdered party that is at fault, not the murderers themselves. In this series of articles the only community, which has no fault about the events that took place in 1915, is the Turkish nation and the *Ittihat ve Terakki* [Society for the Union and Progress of the Ottoman Empire] government -- also known as the Young Turks. Everyone else is guilty of something or other, the missionaries, the Armenians, the Assyrians, the Greeks, the Protestant Church, the *Hamidiye Corps* (ie Kurds), the French, the English and the Russians.

The first article in the series was written after a genocide conference in Stockholm in early 2003.[1] Ince labels the Swedish academics who participated in the conference as "mercenaries", ie paid soldiers. Under the title "Genocide and Sweden", in his article Ince quotes E Feigl in *A Myth of Terror, Armenian Extremism: Its Causes and its Historical Context* to support his position: "... around the lake of Van in February 1915 there was an Armenian insurgence". Heigl further states that the Armenians massacred 30 thousand Turks and adds: "on 22 July 1915 the Turkish army which re-conquered the city, killed 20-25 thousand Armenians for revenge".[2]

Ince charging against imaginary adversaries arrives at the following mock conclusion: "The Armenians who committed treason and rebelled against their country and who killed 30 thousand Ottoman citizens are just and innocent. On the contrary the Ottoman army which punished the treasonous action of the Armenians against their country are 'guilty of committing genocide'". His sarcasm is directed at foreign scholars who implicate Turkey with the crime of genocide. In the quoted passage Heigl states "the Turkish army"; Ince changes this to "the Ottoman Army". Furthermore, it is not clear what Ince means by 30 thousand Ottoman citizens (Turkish, Kurdish or Circassians who inhabited Van at the time?) This matter of 'treason' is worthy of note; *Hürriyet* exploits it profusely in articles about Assyrians and Armenians. As has been documented elsewhere, when the Assyrian priest Yusuf Akbulut stated that "genocide occurred", *Hürriyet* immediately declared him a "traitor".[3]

It is also interesting to note the use of Heigl in this article. Ince who talks about academics, who are not impartial, obviously regards Heigl as an objective academic. The second points of interest is the strategy of reducing the genocide to a single event in Van and then holding the Armenians responsible for massacring Turks and deny the genocide in this manner.

Morgenthau who was the USA consul in Constantinople between 1913 and 1916, reports that in Van, within three days, 24 thousand Armenians were killed. In effect Ince also concedes this. According to Morgenthau when the war started members of the Society for Union and Progress (the Young Turks) asked the Armenians leaders to cross to Russia and start an insurgence against the Russians. Armenians did not accept this. This concept of 'treason' originated from that instance. Morgenthau found it very strange that the Ottoman government which repressed the Armenians for 30 years expected loyalty from them.[4] This illogical expectation unfortunately still endures in Turkey; communities which for years have been repressed are required to show allegiance to "the country" (in effect to the state).

In the second article of the series entitled "Genocide and Sweden" Ince, brands the three Swedish academics who participated in the conference as "mercenaries".[5] It is not specified who pays these so-called "mercenaries". It is clearly implied that the Assyrians pay the academics of the Swedish Universities, which of course is a fabrication of Ince's; the Assyrians lack the resources which the Turkish Republic enjoys.

With great fanfare, Ince points out that two priest participated in the conference, and as though this fact has any significance, adds sarcastically, "of course you cannot have a genocide [conference] without priests"[6] I would respond to this assertion thus, "priest and religious leaders have the right to participate in genocide conferences for priests were also subjected to massacres". Furthermore, what could be so objectionable about priests participating in a conference? Ince who derides the involvement of priests in the conference seems to find quite normal the partaking of the Turkish Consulate staff in the same event. In fact, he hides this detail from his readers. With this type of half-truths and concealments, Ince is appealing to the prejudices of the Turkish readers and in fact he is reinforcing this narrow-mindedness. It is clearly implied that the participation of priest in conferences amount to a church conspiracy. According to Ince, members of the Protestant Church have contributed to the rendering of events as "genocide", rather than as "civil war".

Ince, who is clearly not very objective, surprisingly, I must say, published a letter from an Assyrian, by the name Michael, who took an exception to the first three articles in the series. Ince could not resist, however, making this comment concerning the letter-writer: "a typical example of 'genocidist' mind"; 'genocidist', to coin a term, being a person who pursues the issue of genocide. Michael, who notes that the Turkish academic who participated in the Swedish conference "Omer Turan, is clearly not very knowledgeable" also makes an interesting observation to Ince "[e]very day you seek rights for the Turks who live in Europe from the Europeans who you still cal gavurs [infidels]. Furthermore, you are seeking rights you are not prepared to grant to your own minorities".[7]

The journalist, who does not respond to this observation, mockingly calls Michael 'Baron Michael'. Why is Ince derisive of his Assyrian reader? If someone contemptuously him 'Ozdemir Pasha', would he not take exception to that? Ince's response to his reader's comment was: "How can I not trust Omer Turan and instead trust Swedish professors who are deprived of knowledge of the Ottoman language and the old script who accordingly cannot research the Ottoman Archives?"

If professor Turan has found a document in the Ottoman archives, which proves that "the genocide did not occur", he should provide it to academics and publish it promptly. There is no such document because there could be no such document and Omer who is doing research in the Ottoman Archives cannot prove that genocide did not occur. The documents in the Ottoman Archives have been carefully selected and any documents, which may be drawn upon to discuss the genocide, would not be available for the public. Documents indicating or proving genocide would not be given to researchers so as not to contradict the Official Thesis and version of events of the State. It is, however, also possible that archival staff can make errors and underestimate the value of some documents to third parties.

Moreover, the genocide is not an event that could be proven only through the documents in the Ottoman Archives. The archives of Germany, France and Britain, as well as others, have already been researched, documents published and the genocide of 1915 is beyond doubt except in Turkey itself.[8] I would respond to Ince in this way: "would I not trust the Swedish academics who have been educated in a liberal country, and trust instead Omer Turan who does research in Turkish Universities, unable to evade the framework of the Official Thesis?"

Ince's hatred of Assyrians is evident in the second series he entitles 'Yalanin Süryanicesi' [Lies in Syriac]. In this series, which started as a response to an Assyrian reader, Ince says, "we should trust non partisan historians". He never identifies those so-called non partisan historians; perhaps Omer Turan and some American academics paid by the Turkish Republic qualify as non partisan.

Ince accepts deportations took place in the Ottoman Empire but attributes this to the civil war and the need to defend the indivisibility of the Ottoman Empire. In his third article in this series, he advises his readers to read "the non partisan historians", though still these books or their authors are not identified -- most probably Ince has Omer Turan's books in mind. Finally, he asks his reader to be patient and announces that he is just about to embark upon discussing "the Assyrians events of 1915".[9]

In the fifth article Ince states that the Suryani [Assyrians] were forced to live with the Muslim Arabs who from the VII. Century dominated Mesopotamia: "In those days as there was no national consciousness, many Suryanis converted to Islam in order to avoid paying the cizye tax [for non-Muslim] and live in peace". He also adds that the Suryanis continued to convert to Islam even after the Turks dominated Anatolia [Asia Minor]. These assertions could be true. The Assyrians and other Christian peoples were forced to convert to Islam in different periods. What is objectionable, however, is Ince's assertion: "Among the Suryani who happily converted to Islam, do not doubt that there could be many ancestors of current Turkish nationalists." [10] Many Turkish nationalists could have Assyrian ancestors but the notion that the Assyrians happily converted to Islam is peculiar hypothesis, to say the least. More than likely those who wanted to avoid heavy taxes or be subjected to the Ottoman scythe and other discrimination have converted to Islam. I personally I have not read of mass instances when the Christians converted to Islam happily (that is voluntarily and without a threat) after the Arab arrival in Mesopotamia and the Turkish arrival in Asia Minor. Ince would not have read those either. It is yet another false hypothesis.

In the seventh article on the topic, it is the turn of the Greeks to be attacked: "in the Greek insurgence of Moria that began in 1821, 25 thousand Muslims were killed in a few days" [note that he says Muslims not Turks]. I wonder how many Hellenes were killed in the four centuries of Ottoman domination? Are they not important? To call the Greek Independence War an 'insurgence' is a phenomenon that could be encountered only in the official Turkish history books. According to this notion, whoever rebelled against the Ottomans was a traitor. Only the Turkish nation is entitled to independence and other nations could only be slaves of Turks, and at the same time grateful for their situation. This is the thinking one discerns by reading these articles. Ince continues with inanities in the same article. "In the nineteenth century the reforms resulted in more freedom for the Christian peoples and that encouraged their wishes for independence. Moral of the story: do not grant the minorities any freedom because they could rebel and demand independence.

I am not sure how Ince measured the freedom of the subjugated (reaya) peoples in the Ottoman Empire but it seems their share of this difficult to measure concept (freedom) had increased. What were these freedoms though? Aytekin Yılmaz, in his Turkish book "Anatolia": from multiculturalism to monoculturalism defines these "freedoms" as follows: In the Ottoman Empire the non-Muslim peoples were treated as second-class citizens. They were subjected to many denigrating practices. For example, it was prohibited to ride a horse, carry a weapon, to walk on the footpath. The color of their shoes and the quality of the fabric of their clothes had to be different. It was forbidden for them to wear collared caftan, clothing made of silk, fine muslin, fur coat, and turban. For example, the Armenians wore red hut and shoes, the Greeks black and the Jews blue of the same. They also had to paint their houses with different colours. They could not even wear clogs in the bath house (hamam). They had to hang a small bell in waist clothes [or bath towels]. [11]

When Ince says 'more freedoms' he may mean that after the Tanzimat (Reform) period the Christians could finally wear clogs and remove their bells.

"If Abdülhamit II inaugurated a Panislamist policy, the reason is the successive rebellions of Christians for Independence and the Russian, French and English politics against the Ottoman Empire." In short, the Ottoman Panislamism is also the fault of the Christians. Perhaps, Pan Turkism is also a foreign conspiracy.

In his eight article Ince alleges that the "Assyrian genocide was invented". [12] How did the Assyrians invent genocide? That is to say, how did this conspiracy took place? Had "the Assyrians" (which Assyrians?) gathered in a place and said "let us invent

genocide"? These types of arguments are childish and devoid of any semblance of seriousness. They can go no further than fooling an unsuspecting Turkish public, if at all.

In his tenth article, Ince - I would agree with some of his remarks here - states: "You English who's land you are distributing to whom? ... You English you try to distribute Ottoman lands but why are you giving away the same lands to the Assyrians as well as the Kurds?"[13] I also find unacceptable that the English and the French attempted to have distributed Middle Eastern and Ottoman lands according to their national interests at the time, but the problematic notion is that "those lands" belonged to the Turks only. The ancestors of the Ottomans did not bring these lands they occupied from Central Asia, whence the Turks originated. Ince says these lands belonged to the Muslims for the last 1200 years. First of all, why go as far back as 1200 years only? Secondly, why is it that the heirs to the Muslim loot are only the Turks? Thirdly, it is not clear when he says Muslims which nations or communities does he mean: Arabs, Kurds, Turks, Turcomans, Persians, Alevi or Sunnis? Because he cannot say that Turks lived in Asia Minor for 1200 years he uses the appellation Muslim as surrogate for Turk. The Arabs who are also Muslim were not bound by religious ties and preferred to become independent from the Empire.

Ancient nations such as the Hellenes and the Assyrians lived much longer in Asia Minor and Mesopotamia respectively - much more than 1200 years - yet in Ince's doctrine only the Muslims who lived there for 1200 years and later Turks are entitled to them. These suppositions are ahistorical and illogical.

In the article series "Lies in Syriac" Ozdemir Ince liberally quotes and Assyrian researcher, Yakup Bilge. Ince uses passages from Bilge's book to criticize the Assyrians. Bilge in his book states that "... for Assyrians the most important period was the First World War. The Ottoman forces participated in the Assyrian-Kurdish war. The eastern Assyrians (the Assyrians who lived in Hakkari and Van) had declared war on the Ottomans". Following this quotation Ince repeats that "the Assyrians declared war on the Ottomans!" However, Bilge specifies as "Eastern Assyrians". It was the Nestorian (Assyrian) Patriarch who declared war. The Syriac Orthodox Assyrians (Western Syrians) who lived in Turabdin made no such formal declaration although they were still attacked by the Ottomans and were also subjected to genocide. Either Ince does not know these historical facts or he is trying to confuse the reader. Even though Ince makes liberal use of Bilge's book, he seemed to have overlooked the following sentence from the book: "... in Middle East during the upheaval that began in the beginning of the century and continued up to 1935, the Assyrians were continually subjected to massacres and were forced to live their homeland." [14] Although Bilge blames the West for the upheaval, Ince who perhaps was reluctant to also blame the West for the massacres, ignores this part of the book.

In the eleventh article Ince wonders: "after all these events if the Turkish Republic does not trust the Assyrians is it the fault of the Turkish Republic?" [15] Well, yes, it is! Note that it is not the right of the nation that was subjected to genocide to be distrustful. This right is reserved, according to Ince, to the inheritors of the state that perpetrated the genocide. Again, the 1915 events against the Assyrians are placed in a context of a civil war and then Assyrians are labeled as traitors and this is why Ince says the Turkish Republic does not trust Assyrians. It seems superfluous to make such argument at all, given that there are very few Assyrians left in Turkey to constitute a threat to the Turkish Republic.

Ince in the same article also raises the question of impartiality of sources of information for genocide research: "the reports by Christian missionaries, staff of consulates and secret service staff should be carefully examined (because they are not impartial)". Ömer Turan's sources no doubt are impartial and objective (!). The objectivity of the staff of the Ottoman Bureaucracy and the secret agency Special Organization (Teskilat-i Mahsusa) is well known. Bilal Simsir who has carried out research in this field, in his books published by the Turkish Historical Society - no less - have included many reports by staff of the foreign consulates. Consequently, reports that suits the Official Thesis are published as neutral, independent and objective observations, while all other sources are regarded as subjective and partisan.[16]

"Finally we need to defer this matter to non-partisan historical science and real non-partisan honorable historians". By "honorable and non-partisan historians" no doubt Ince is referring to Turkish Republic supporters such as Justin McCarthy. It is another well known fact that the foreigners working for the Turkish Republic are "non-partisan" but the foreigners who conduct research on the genocide are paid mercenaries. It is time for this disingenuous and dishonest proposition that "the question of genocide should be left to the historians" to come to an end. While the Turkish consulate official are expected to abandon their normal duties and, where possible prevent, and/or attend genocide conferences to sabotage them, it is quite hypocritical to say that the study of the genocide should be left to the historians. Ince who does not seem to be a historian, yet believes himself to be entitled to comment. A right he is unwilling to grant to the Assyrians.

It is also important to add that Taner Akçam who regards the 1915 incidents as "an event of mass murder" is not mentioned in the articles. Naturally, he is not objective either.[17] According to Akçam, a coded telegraph sent from the Interior Ministry to Diyarbakir on 12 July 1915 states that in Mardin: "700 Armenians and other Christians were slaughtered like sheep", refers to "estimates that in total 2000 people were killed" and it adds that there is fear that all Christians will be massacred. The telegraph concludes with the following sentence: "the general measures and policies which were constituted for the Armenians under no circumstances would apply to other Christians" and the telegraph asks that this practice end".[18]

This document was read out to Ömer Turan in the Stockholm Conference and the good professor said that he did not believe this document, despite the fact that it was written by staff of the Ottoman Bureaucracy and published by the Turkish Historical Society.[19]

It is difficult to analyse this manner of thinking, which is approved by Ince. Documents which do not support the Official Thesis of the Republic are wrong, falsified, partisan, product of a conspiracy, or other, yet documents published by the official channels in Turkey which talk about Greek, Armenian atrocities against the Muslim population, and documents declaring Assyrians to be treasonous, are correct and non-partisan. This is completely unreasonable.

As a result matters that should have been resolved long time ago are still current and very much on the public agenda. In 2004 the Turkish Republic representatives are still hoping this matter will go away if they deny it long enough. In effect, the efforts of some academic and journalist have the opposite effect. They guarantee a public discourse on the genocide by the continual denial and machinations. There is nothing to gain by attaching a small community such as the Assyrians in Turkey. They pose no threat to Turkey.

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ENDNOTES

- [1] For more information about the conference see 'Türk tarihçi Omer Turan, Soykırım'ı (seyfo) yalan ve çamur atmalarla inkar etmeye çalıştı', ACSA Betnahrin Information, 4/6/2003 [<http://www.acsa.nu/artikel.asp?lankid=22&artid=338>]
- [2] O Ince, 'Soykırım ve İsveç (1)', Hürriyet, 9 April 2003.
- [3] R.Yavuz, 'İçimizdeki hain', Hürriyet, 4 November 2003.
- [4] H. Morgenthau, Ambassador Morgenthau's Story, 1918, XXI.
- [5] O Ince, 'Soykırım ve İsveç (2)', Hürriyet, 11 April 2003.
- [6] O Ince, 'Soykırım ve İsveç (3)', Hürriyet, 14 April 2003.
- [7] O Ince, 'Aldatıldınız', Hürriyet, 25 April 2003.
- [8] G Yonan, Asur Soykırımı: Unutulan bir Holokaust, İstanbul, 1996.
- [9] O Ince, 'Yalanın Süryanicesi (2)', Hürriyet, 2 May 2003.
- [10] O Ince, 'Yalanın Süryanicesi (5)', Hürriyet, 9 May 2003.
- [11] A. Yılmaz, Çokkültürlülüğten Tekkültürlüğe "Anadolu", Tohum Basın Yayın, İstanbul, 2002
- [12] O Ince, 'Yalanın Süryanicesi (8)', Hürriyet, 16 May 2003.
- [13] O Ince, 'Yalanın Süryanicesi (10)', Hürriyet, 21 May 2003.
- [14] Y Bilge, Süryanilerin Kökeni ve Türkiyeli Süryaniler, İstanbul, 1991.
- [15] O Ince, 'Yalanın Süryanicesi (11)', Hürriyet, 23 May 2003.
- [16] B Simsir, British Documents on Ottoman Armenians, Vols 1 and 2, Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1983.
- [17] T Akçam, '1915 Efsaneler ve Gerçekler', Radikal2, 26 May 2003.
- [18] T.Akçam, İnsan hakları ve Ermeni sorunu, İstanbul, 1999, p.25.
- [19] 'Türk tarihçi Omer Turan, Soykırım'ı (seyfo) yalan ve çamur atmalarla inkar etmeye çalıştı', ACSA, 4/6/2003 [<http://www.acsa.nu/artikel.asp?lankid=22&artid=338>]