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Turkish parliamentary debates about the international recognition of the Armenian genocide: development and variations in the official denialism

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ABSTRACT

The main source of animosity in modern Turkish – Armenian relations is the debate on the international recognition of the Armenian genocide. To provide an evidence-based and thorough perspective on the Turkish political stance in this discussion, this article explores all the relevant speeches in Turkish parliamentary records. It pays particular attention to political parties' stances, the historical evolution of the debate, and the significance of the individual profiles of parliamentarians who contributed to the discussion. The findings show that most political parties in Turkey articulated versions of denial, except for a few marginal anti-denial voices. The study concludes that while political parties' ideological orientations predominantly shape the Turkish debate on the international recognition of the Armenian genocide, historical contexts, local memories, and the individual backgrounds of parliamentarians seem to inspire minor variations in their tones.

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Introduction

1965 marks the international surfacing of the Armenian genocide with the first efforts of the Armenian diaspora for its recognition. This emergent awareness was influenced by the Holocaust consciousness that rose among the Jewry in the early 1960s (Novick 1999). It ignited the politicization of the hitherto strictly cultural Armenian identity in the diaspora as a corollary of the global rise of cultural politics (De Waal 2015). Before these developments, Turkish politics had avoided any debates about the Armenian suffering in 1915. Since then, it has become a constant debate, especially reinvigorated every 24th of April by genocide anniversaries. First, the issue was perceived by Turkish politicians as having emerged out of nowhere and without any historicity. Today, the recognition of the Armenian genocide not only remains the most important obstacle to the rapprochement of Turkish-Armenian relations but also poses difficulties in wider Turkish foreign policy. For example, President Biden's formal declaration in April 2021 that recognized the massacres of Armenians in the early 20th century as genocide strained relations

between the United States and Turkey. After he met with President Biden, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said, ‘Thank God, the US recognition of the Armenian genocide did not come up in the meeting’ (Malsin 2021).

This study develops an evidence-based perspective on the perceptions of international recognition of the Armenian genocide in Turkish politics by scrutinizing all relevant parliamentary speeches between 1965 and 2018. It contributes to the academic literature on the perception of the Armenian genocide in Turkey, which successfully delineated important aspects and proponents of the denialist perspective, as well as contradictory accounts in local memories (Bayraktar 2015; Çevik 2022; Dixon 2010, 467–85; Göçek 2015; Gürpınar 2016; Üngör 2014; Yavuz 2020). Our study develops this scholarship by conducting the first comprehensive and systematic exploration of Turkish parliamentary records on the topic. It illustrates that political parties in the parliament predominantly denied the genocide as allegations that are (a) historically false, (b) unfair, (c) diplomatic manoeuvres and (d) national security threats. Overall, the research demonstrates that while political parties’ denialist approaches seem to shape the Turkish debate, historical contexts and the individual backgrounds of parliamentarians contribute to variations in the tones of denialism but do not significantly alter the content.

The paper investigated the Turkish parliamentary speeches ($N = 594$) that referred to the international recognition of the Armenian genocide between 1965 and 2018. The data is collected from the parliamentary records that are available online (TBMM).¹ First, we downloaded all records of the parliamentary sessions in the period. Second, we used the search function in pdf files to find the mentions of the Armenian genocide in the parliamentary speeches. Third, we created a dataset of 594 parliamentary speeches referring to the Armenian genocide. The study took the individual speeches of the members of parliament as the unit of analysis and explored the ways in which the politicians reflected on the genocide recognition. To achieve that, it relied on qualitative content analysis (White and Marsh 2006), an inductive method that is a great fit for the open-ended and exploratory nature of this study. In addition, the method was helpful in comprehending not only the manifest but also the latent, implied and symbolic content of the parliamentary debates (Nefes 2022).

Below, the article explores the discursive variations and the overwhelming commonalities shared by the political parties in the Turkish parliament between 1965 and 2018. First, it unfolds the characteristics of the parliamentary debates about the recognition of the Armenian genocide by delineating the main features of political parties’ perspectives. Second, it goes beyond the analysis of political party stances by detailing the historical evolution of the debate. Third, it discusses the individual profiles and regional backgrounds of parliamentarians and how these might have influenced the debate. Finally, the paper concludes by scrutinizing the main features and political party variations of the parliamentary debate over time and the impacts of the major contributors.

Main features of the Armenian genocide debate in the Turkish parliament

Political parties in the Turkish parliament responded to the debates on the international recognition of the Armenian Genocide with four types of arguments nearly every time. They denied the genocide as (1) historically false, (2) unfair allegations targeting Turkey, (3) deliberate diplomatic manoeuvres and (4) national security threats to Turkey. In

exceptional cases, a few parliamentarians from the Kurdish left-wing movement contested these accounts and sought to re-open the debate for genocide recognition in the 2000s.

As a start, parliamentarians often depicted the debate as a distortion of historical facts. Suat Hayri Ürgüplü (Justice Party, *Adalet Partisi* - AP) stated that the genocide allegation ‘is based on a deliberate misrepresentation of the historical truth and is not embraced by the majority of Armenians in Turkey and abroad.’² This approach was reiterated in other speeches: Erol Ağgil (Social Democratic People’s Party, *Sosyaldemokrat Halkçı Parti* - SHP) stated that it was a ‘fabrication,’³ Mehmet Gazioğlu (True Path Party, *Doğru Yol Partisi* - DYP) called it an emblematic product of ‘the contemporary age of propaganda’⁴; and Saffet Başaran (Democratic Left Party, *Demokratik Sol Parti* – DSP) referred to it as a ‘distortion of historical reality.’⁵ Turkish political parties’ self-assurance in denial was also manifest in their call to open all archives and investigate the issue thoroughly. Onur Öymen (Republican People’s Party, *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* - CHP) expressed this self-confidence buoyantly: ‘They tell us to face the historical reality! [Jacques] Chirac echoes this (. . .). Any historian can freely browse our archives and publish his or her findings. We have nothing to worry about.’⁶

Parliamentarians constantly recounted that Armenian radicals revolted against the Ottoman Empire and attempted to dismember it with the support of foreign powers. This was used as a justification for Turkish retaliation, which the politicians portrayed as merely an undesirable, small-scale act of brutality. Zeki Ertugay⁷ (of DYP) and Erkan Akçay⁸ (Nationalist Movement Party, *Milliyetçi Halk Partisi* - MHP) labelled the Armenians traitors. Building on the trope of ‘Ottoman tolerance,’ they argued that Armenians and Turks were living peacefully until (transgressing the confines of the prevailing moral order) Armenians, seeking independence, massacred local Turkish populations. Lütfi Esengün (Virtue Party, *Fazilet Partisi* - FP) responded to the US senators and the US Armenian lobby by arguing that ‘if you want to learn what happened 85 years ago, come to Erzurum Alaca Village and see the results of the massacre by Armenians (. . .). There is no family in Erzurum whose ancestors were not victimized.’⁹ A softer tone by Mümtaz Soysal (DSP) portrayed the inter-communal violence as a tragic episode in which Armenians and Turks victimized each other: ‘Yes, we accept that intercommunal massacres between Turks and Armenians took place during the First World War (. . .), but there was no Armenian Genocide because they were not killed for racial reasons.’¹⁰ Moreover, several parliamentarians, such as Süleyman Sarıbaş¹¹ (Motherland Party, *Anavatan Partisi* - ANAP), Rüstü Şardağ¹² (SHP), Ömer Lütfi Hocaoğlu¹³ (AP) and Bekir Aksoy¹⁴ (MHP), argued that hostility against minorities does not exist in the Turkish ethos (*Türk kültüründe*) as proven by many praiseworthy exemplars of tolerance.

In addition, Turkish political parties often responded to the genocide recognition efforts by calling them politically biased allegations. They added that history could not be judged in parliaments. Nihat Zeybekçi (Justice and Development Party, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* - AKP) stated that ‘members of our government, as well as the previous prime ministers and presidents of the Turkish Republic, repeated one thing about the Armenian allegations: “Leave history to historians.”’¹⁵ This line of thought implies that politicians in various countries are under the influence of the Armenian diaspora. Haluk Koç (CHP) criticized the recognition of the genocide in France by

maintaining that ‘the current President of France (...) is seen as a political caricature in France and beyond. He makes a despicable attempt to gain the votes of 500 thousand members of the Armenian minority by succumbing to the genocide allegations.’¹⁶ Furthermore, several parliamentarians described genocide recognition as an example of the double standards of the West. When Germany passed the motion, Oktay Vural (MHP) retorted that ‘a country with a long record of genocide cannot disgrace our past ... They should look at a mirror instead of blaming the Turkish people, shame!’¹⁷ Cüneyt Canver (People’s Party, *Halk Partisi* - HP) reacted to the genocide debate in the United States along similar lines: ‘It is certain that Turks did not commit an Armenian Genocide, but it is beyond doubt that the United States is responsible for the genocides of Native Americans, African Americans, and innocent people in poor countries!’¹⁸

Most political parties saw the international genocide recognition as a diplomatic threat that would jeopardize the international image of Turkey. Mehmet Hazer (CHP) warned that ‘the genocide allegations seek to falsely present the Turkish nation to the world as barbarous and miscreant with vile intentions. This recurrent lie begins to pass as truth in some countries.’¹⁹ Parliamentarians, such as Nüvit Yetkin²⁰ (CHP), Ömer Ferruh İltir²¹ (ANAP) and Temel Karamollaoğlu²² (FP), warned that this could undermine diplomatic and economic relations with the West. In parallel, politicians such as Tevfik Koçak²³ (SHP), Gürcan Dağdaş²⁴ (MHP) and Ramazan Toprak²⁵ (AKP) portrayed the developments concerning the recognition of the Armenian Genocide as a direct national security threat to Turkey. They explained that it was a part of the Armenians’ plot to undermine and dismember the Turkish republic to establish a homeland, Greater Armenia. In so doing, Turkish politicians frequently depict Armenians as an uprooted, international enemy. The word Armenian is commonly affixed to negative nouns, such as Armenian provocation (*Ermeni tahriki*) and Armenian lies (*Ermeni yalanları*). One ubiquitous label consistently attached to the phrase Armenian is *mihrak*, a keyword in the Turkish nationalist parlance that presumes all perceived threats to be part of deliberately mastered plots that may loosely be translated as ‘an agent of influence.’ Overall, this article shows that a hegemonic discourse of denialism transcends partisan divides in Turkish politics (for similar findings, see Dixon 2010; Göçek 2015). Nonetheless, one can discern nuances and underlying political differences. Below, the article scrutinizes these differences in terms of the historical evolution of the debate and the backgrounds of parliamentarians.

Historical stages of the Turkish parliamentary reaction

Based on the qualitative analysis of the speeches, this section delineates the evolution of the genocide debate in the Turkish parliament in three periods: (1) the foundational decades (1960–1980), (2) the formation of the official denialist paradigm in the 1980s and (3) the beginning of the challenges to the denialist claims starting in 2000. This periodization is in line with Göçek’s (2015) and Dixon’s (2010) argument that the official genocide denial is mostly shaped under the military regime that ruled Turkey between 1980 and 1983. Dixon’s (2010) also notes that the official denialist narrative was replicated by bureaucratic elites after 2000. Moreover, Göçek’s (2015) underlines that the terror attacks of the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) and

the Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide (JCOAG) in the 1970s and early 1980s bolstered a hostile attitude towards the Armenian genocide debate in Turkey.

The 1960s brought a new entanglement to the Armenian question (Nefes 2021). The rising anti-Turkish sentiment among the Armenians of Lebanon and the erection of statues in memoriam of the victims of the genocide in countries including France, Brazil and Lebanon were addressed in Turkish parliamentary speeches with fervent calls to respond to the ‘Armenian slanders.’ Koçaş (CHP) stated, ‘we deeply wish for the demonstration of the falsity of the Armenian slanders articulated from Lebanon to San Francisco and even at the gates of the United Nations Building. Their lies should be exposed.’²⁶ Koçaş also questioned the minister responsible for international publicity, saying, ‘how many of our press attachés established contacts with the local presses and had them write favourably to us regarding the Armenian affair?’²⁷ Most of the parliamentarians who contributed to the genocide recognition debate in this period treated the topic as an international relations mishap.

Meanwhile, Turkish politicians reacted to the collaboration of Greeks and Armenians, especially with respect to the Cypriot imbroglio and Armenian mobilization for recognition of the genocide in the 1960s and 1970s. Turkish-Greek relations soared after the tensions over Cyprus. In 1963–1964, the Greek Cypriots wrecked the power-sharing consociational government of the Zürich and London Agreements (1959) and insulated the Turks, which prompted a nationalist uproar in Turkey (Akgönül 2007; Dodd 2010). The Armenian imbroglio erupted in 1965 when the Armenian diaspora began to commemorate the genocide. As both Armenians and Greeks were seen as the conspiring domestic foes (*iç mihrak*) responsible for the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire in the nationalist-republican account, the connection was easy to establish for Turkish politicians. Koçaş (CHP) expressed this as follows: ‘Living in small communities spread throughout the world, manipulated by the Greeks, Cypriots and their allies, Armenians launched a campaign.’²⁸ Following this rationale, Turkish parliamentarians ignored the Armenian Soviet Republic and denied agency to the Armenian communities in France, the United States and Lebanon. Given that the prior existence of Armenians in Anatolia was not acknowledged either, Armenians were mostly associated with the notorious 1915 events. This obfuscation of the Armenian past in Anatolia further reinforces the uprooted imagery and the scope of the Armenian peril.

Although political parties shared an unassailable consensus in denying the genocide between 1960 and 1980, each political party presented a distinct version in line with their ideological dispositions. Hüsni Dikeçligil (MHP), a deputy from Kayseri who moved from the centre-right Justice Party to the Turkish ultranationalist MHP, referred to Greeks and Armenians while criticizing the Alevi party (*Birlik Partisi*) in Turkey.²⁹ Perceiving the foundation of a political party based on a religious denomination as a threat to the unity of the Turkish nation, he compared it to the ‘mischievous deeds’ of subversive Greek organizations, Armenians, and European missionaries who actively took part in the fall of the Ottoman Empire. In other words, he linked the Armenian reference to his ardent anti-left and anti-Alevi ethos. Social democratic CHP parliamentarians reiterated their allegiance to the republican nation-state and saw the Armenian genocide allegations as an assault on the republic. Mehmet Hazer (CHP) reminded us that the republic, upon its promulgation, treated not only Turks but also Armenians humanely and justly.³⁰ After maintaining that the Armenian issue had been a major front

of the Eastern Question before its successful dissolution by the founding father of the republic Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Hazer warned that the revival of the Armenian issue in the 1960s implicated the ominous looming of a second Eastern Question as a threat to the Turkish state built on Kemalist premises.

Turkish denialist canon was predominantly shaped during the military junta between 1980 and 1983. The national security establishment launched a diplomatic counterattack through its institutions, such as the Turkish Historical Society, in response to the Armenian allegations and the ASALA terror attacks. Until 1980, politicians did not put forward a systematic denialist perspective. Since then, books, propaganda pamphlets, and other published sources produced especially in the first half of the 1980s (concomitant with the military junta between 1980 and 1983) offered a well-crafted and calculated discourse for politically convenient predispositions and established the denialist canon (Dixon 2010, 467–85; Turan and Gürkan Öztan 2018). Bilal Şimşir, Kamuran Gürün, Salahi Sonyel and Türkkaya Ataöv were major authors who crafted and structured denialist narratives going beyond patches of arguments articulating sentiments rather than counter-arguments in the 1970s. These authors, however, also all developed different versions of denialism: left-wing anti-imperialist, centrist-bureaucratic and right-wing conservative. By the 1980s, substantial amounts of resources had been allocated for public relations efforts, especially by Şükrü Elekdağ, the Turkish ambassador to Washington (1979–1989). They were used for various ends, such as funding Western academics who could support the official denialist perspective and influencing the Jewish lobby in the United States. This approach was shared by all political parties in the Turkish parliament throughout the 1980s. Subsequently, the 1990s saw further consolidation of the consensus. Whereas a new pro-European current was popularized, and the two major Turkish centre-right parties, eager for EU integration, endorsed a modernizing appeal, their approach to this issue remained firmly unchanged. The 1990s witnessed a new pluralism and multiculturalism in the intellectual and cultural scenes (Bali 2002; Nefes 2012, 2013, 2015). Identity politics and nostalgia for the bygone cosmopolitan Istanbul became widespread. Nonetheless, these openings hardly affected the parliamentary discourse on genocide denial, which remained fixed.

By the early 2000s, dissenting voices came to be heard when a few historians and intellectuals publicly spoke about the events in 1915, such as Taner Akçam and Halil Berktaş (Radikal 2000, *Milliyet* 2000). Confronting the official consensus regarding the 1915 events demarcated the threshold of progressivism in the 2000s (Aral 2011; Göçek and Grigor Suny 2011; Zarakolu 2009). Thus, the theme turned from a national cause to a nationalist stand against domestic enemies and traitors, ‘the fifth column,’ fraught with unreliable liberal and left subversion and national heresies. When the first academic conference in Turkey that delved into the genocide was held in 2005, Şükrü Elekdağ (CHP) reacted vehemently: ‘What is saddening is the manipulation of Bosphorus University (. . .). Is there no one there criticizing this treason? I condemn the university’s transformation into an Armenian pawn.’³¹ Süleyman Sarıbaş (ANAP) agreed, stating, ‘especially given the presentations delivered in the conference, there is no doubt that it is tantamount to treason.’³² Sarıbaş also brought forth Nobel laureate Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk’s controversial remarks on the responsibility for killing one and half million Armenians and perceived it as a public relations act on his behalf to play the tune for the Westerners: ‘He needed to say the most provocative remark and

contradict the Turkish reality (. . .). There are countless enemies of Turkey: domestic and abroad.³³ Although the AKP opened room for free discussion of the issue in the first decade of its governance, this flexibility was not reflected in the parliamentary discourse. In this context, AKP parliamentarians often reiterated the conservative/right-wing version of the official rhetoric. The AKP's relative flexibility was overhauled by its authoritarian turn in the early 2010s, after which it fully endorsed the national security establishment package.

In contrast, parliamentarians from the Kurdish left-wing movement challenged the official denialist paradigm in the Turkish parliament from 2008. Sırrı Sakık (Peoples' Democratic Party, *Halkların Demokratik Partisi* - HDP) maintained that 'Mustafa Kemal told Kazım Karabekir that "whoever took an active part in the Armenian massacre was despicable."' This proves that we have a bloody and contemptible period in our history³⁴; Filiz Kerestecioğlu (HDP) stated that Talat Pasha, the Ottoman Minister of Interior in 1915, had acknowledged the murder of more than one million Armenians.³⁵ Adil Kurt (BDP) rhetorically inquired, 'where are the Armenians who lived in this country?'³⁶ Moreover, they argued that the Turkish state should apologize. Akin Birdal (DTP) stated, 'why are you afraid of apologizing? It is not enough to apologize only to Armenians (. . .). Many people and communities suffered: Mustafa Suphi, Sabahattin Ali, Armenians, Greeks, Syrians, Jews, Kurds and women.'³⁷ Meral Daniş Beştaş (HDP) added that 'hundreds of thousands of Armenians were killed. Turkish parliament failed to name this grand tragedy (. . .). We share the suffering of Armenians (. . .). Facing historical reality is essential for peace.'³⁸ Although exceptional, this attitude nonetheless proves the rule because, as political parties representing the Kurdish left wing, their rhetoric is grounded on denunciation of the Turkish state discourses. The movement's silence about the Kurdish agency in the genocide is another theme that could be elaborated on elsewhere.

The significance of regional backgrounds of the parliamentarians

Analyzing Turkish denialism solely on the political party level might neglect regional differences. While some regions have no major history with Armenians, which might render official denialism trustworthy knowledge, others have a deep-seated history of interaction. As Üngör's (2014) research on oral histories shows, variations in the local memories of the Turkish-Armenian conflict could create different approaches to the Armenian genocide. Accordingly, regions that suffered the Armenian-Turkish conflict supported the official denialism that complemented local animosities. The period between 1912 and 1922 was a decade of ethnic violence featuring massacres, expulsions, and ethnic cleansing in various regions. The First Balkan War brought the systematic eviction of the Turkish population from Rumelia. This sequence of expulsions traumatized the Young Turks, who came to call for ruthless revenge (Kurt 2012). Cevat Emre (2013), in his pamphlets, and Ömer Seyfettin, in his short stories, were the foremost Young Turk men of letters accounting for the ethnic violence Turks in Rumelia had suffered. This ethnic warfare was one reason for the Young Turks to pre-emptively strike Armenians before facing another expulsion. This rancorous Turkish nationalism brought the eradication of not only the Armenian but also the Greek population from Anatolian soil. Nevertheless, once Anatolia felt safe from intrusion, and after the proclamation of

the republic, the Turkish state sought to obliterate the memories of the ethnic warfare that was seen as traumatic and disruptive (see Atalay 2018). It also sought to eradicate the multifaceted regional memories and impose a national monolithic account.

The findings clearly illustrate that all parliamentarians representing localities with conflictual histories with Armenians support official denialism in the same manner. They deny the genocide claims by reflecting on the local memories of Turkish suffering under Armenian violence. Accordingly, this section provides evidence from the expressions from different localities. To start with, we see glimpses of this suppressed ethnic nationalism fraught with the constitutive memories of interethnic violence, especially in the speeches of deputies from the Kars-Erzurum region. Kars is a distinctive city concerning the Armenian genocide. While it was not part of the Ottoman Empire during the First World War and therefore was not a site of the violence, it was one of the major theatres of the Armenian revenge killings of 1917 and 1918 perpetrated by Armenian militants accompanying the Russian army. These local memories influenced the speeches of the parliamentarians from the region. They spoke not only as repeaters of the crafted national security discourse but also as retrievers of home-grown memories. Hasan Erdoğan (CHP) found the efforts of the Armenians abroad to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of their persecution in the hands of Turks ‘saddening for us, the Easterners (*Şarklılar*) [of Turkey].’³⁹ He recalled ‘the traumatic memories of the innocent children and women killed in the hands of Armenians [in Kars] that continue to haunt their surviving families even after half a century.’⁴⁰ Hasan Erdoğan ended his speech by reading a telegraph sent by a villager from his native Sarıkamış [a district of Kars] who called for the parliament to take action against the Armenian commemorations: ‘We are from one of the towns where Armenians have burned Turks alive in the barns, killed pregnant women with bayonets and nailed infants to the doors.’⁴¹ Mehmet Hazer (CHP), another deputy from Kars, also expressed his concerns: ‘In Kars, a region that suffered Armenian violence (...), I met countless victims of the Armenian violence (*mezalim*) whose hands and feet have been cut off.’⁴²

In addition, deputies from Erzurum and the environs (Bayburt, İğdır and Erzincan) incessantly reminded their audiences about the Armenian revenge massacres. Lütfi Esengün (FP), an MP from Erzurum, called those ‘who want to learn what happened eight-five years ago to visit the mass graves in Erzurum villages and see the Armenian violence.’⁴³ Zeki Ertugay (DYP) started his speech on the 1915 events ‘as a deputy from Erzurum.’⁴⁴ Other parliamentarians who alluded to the Armenian massacres overwhelmingly descended from this region.

Another trope of those explicitly depicting the Armenian share in the inter-ethnic violence is that they are predominantly from right-wing parties, mostly the Turkish ultranationalist MHP. While the Kemalist version of the official denialism presented a cold-dispassionate state discourse and recounted inter-ethnic conflict in a relatively more sterilized manner, the conservative-nationalist denialism portrayed Armenians as perpetrators of unspeakable crimes. To institutionalize the imposing state power, the Kemalist state sought to monopolize nationalism as a state privilege, seeing unbridled ethnic nationalism as unruly. Indeed, various scholars of nationalism observed the formative role of communal violence in ethnic identity building (Brass 1997; Brubaker 2009, 30; Tambiah 1996). Despite the state suppression, the speeches by deputies from the vicinities of the zones of Armenian encounters recount memories of theatres of inter-

ethnic hatred before these memories were incorporated by the modern and centralizing nation-state.

The personal backgrounds of the parliamentarians

Apart from their local histories, the personal backgrounds of Turkish parliamentarians seem to have an important effect on the debate about the recognition of the Armenian genocide. Indeed, Dixon's (2010, 467–85) notes that some important proponents of the denialist discourse came from people from certain professional backgrounds, such as retired diplomats and historians. This section explores the profiles of the MPs who were at the forefront of crafting denialist discourse in parliament, taking the floor in the name of their respective political parties. Firstly, retired diplomats and bureaucrats voice analogous discourses, only slightly changing according to their political affinities. They approach the issue from the angle of Turkish foreign policy and national security, especially concerning its significance to relations with the strategic ally, the United States, following the increasing political power of the Armenian diaspora in the US. Indeed, ethnic lobbies became influential in exerting pressure on the US Congress by the 1970s (Goode 2020; Paul and Paul 2009; Zarifian 2014). The Greek lobby, in particular, became successful in the imposition of an arms embargo on Turkey after the Turkish military offensive on Cyprus (Goode 2020). This manoeuvre shocked the Turkish diplomatic establishment. In that environment, many Turkish deputies' references to the genocide debate firmly relate to it as a national security liability. Unsurprisingly, Sadi Koçaş (1919–1998), a pioneer in making the issue a priority who repeatedly brought it to the parliamentary assembly, was not a politician but a retired colonel and a functionary of the 1960–1961 junta appointed by the president as a contingent senator. An early exponent of the theme in the mid-1960s, he operated as an overseer of the national security regime. Koçaş (1967) published one of the first denialist books, *Armenians Through Time and Turkish-Armenian Relations*. He was once a military attaché in Europe who later became deputy prime minister and ran the crackdown on leftists in the military-sanctioned government of 1971–1973.

Subsequently, as the international debate about genocide recognition grew over the years, retired ambassadors made substantial contributions. They helped to create authorized and official scripts of denialism that were used by their political party colleagues and other parliamentarians. Şükrü Elekdag (1924 -) was one of the earliest and pioneering builders and discursive founders of Turkish denialism while serving as Turkey's ambassador to Washington DC between 1979 and 1987, a period that marked the deepening of the Armenian recognition demands and the rise of the Armenian lobby at the US Senate. His offensive included establishing a political-academic complex in 1982. The Institute of Turkish Studies was founded with three million USD of Turkish governmental funding to organize and harness the much-needed Turkish lobby against Armenian propaganda. In 1985, when the US Congress delved into discussing the Armenian genocide, the institute steered the drafting of an open letter to Congress signed by sixty-nine scholars with Turkish, US and European backgrounds, including many eminent scholars of Ottoman history and Turkish studies (Bloxxham 2005; Lowry 2003). The letter called

for objective research on the issue and criticized the endorsement of the Armenian claims as the sole truth without deeply examining the issue.

To counter the powerful and influential Armenian lobby in the United States, the Assembly of Turkish American Associations, under the direction of Elekdağ, prepared and published a handbook on how to respond to the Armenian allegations in 1986 in Washington, DC. He penned the foreword in which he welcomed this enterprise as appearing at a most appropriate time, noting that ‘not many years ago, Turkish Americans sat silently by as American descendants of the Ottoman Armenians disseminated their own highly selective and twisted versions of Turkish history as part of an intense campaign of defamation’ (Assembly of Turkish American Associations 1986, v). For the former ambassador, the book would be a ‘valuable resource for concerned Americans, including Turkish Americans, thought-leaders, and policy-makers, who are working to dispel the effects of years of anti-Turkish propaganda’ (Assembly of Turkish American Associations 1986, v). The compilation gathered numerous pro-Turkish pieces in newspapers and journals during the atrocities and later, including those that appeared in American newspapers and journals.

Once Elekdağ became an MP almost two decades later, in 2002, he actively partook in parliamentary debates. After one of his many speeches on the topic, he was thanked by Mehmet Ali Şahin (AKP), who at the time was a deputy prime minister (and political adversary of Elekdağ) for his ‘experienced statesman quality (*devlet adamı kişiliği*) and erudition on the Armenian allegations.’⁴⁵ Elekdağ self-styled himself as the foremost authority on the issue, especially due to his lifetime of service to the Turkish state. His speeches focused on the balance of power in the US Senate. He sees the genocide allegations as part of an elaborate and ingenious plot instrumentalized as part of a master plan. He calls this the 4T plan of Armenians, made up of four Turkish words starting with T: *tanıtım* (propaganda), *tanıma* (recognition), *tazminat* (indemnity) and *toprak* (land). This is the most systematic explanation of these allegations from the standpoint of political authority:

The first step is to propagate genocide allegations over Armenian terror attacks, which began in 1975 and ended in 1994. Armenian terrorists murdered Turkish diplomats and their families abroad. The second step is the recognition stage in which they try to convince the international community about the genocide allegations. The Armenian diaspora has made significant progress in this (...). The third step is to demand indemnity for Armenian inheritors whose ancestors were victims of the genocide. This step will be followed by a final step, claiming land from Turkey. The Armenian side partially achieved the third step. New York Life Insurance and AXA Insurance companies recognized the Armenian Genocide and agreed to pay indemnity to the inheritors.⁴⁶

Gündüz Aktan (1941–2008) was another diplomat who turned into a public intellectual in the late 1990s upon his retirement. He subsequently became an MP for the ultra-nationalist MHP in 2007, mainly thanks to his public intellectual persona, partaking in the TV debates and running a column in a left-liberal Turkish daily *Radikal* as an avid basher of the ‘Armenian defamation’ campaigns. Nevertheless, Aktan hardly reflected the right-wing ultranationalist MHP cultural milieu, apart from his nationalist proclivities. It could be argued that his denialism does not only reflect MHP grassroots but is merged with the Turkish state’s diplomatic stance on the topic. Likewise, Kamran İnan (1929–2015) was another former diplomat who actively participated in the debates about the

international recognition of the Armenian genocide as a representative of centre-right political parties from the 1970s to 1990s (For his political and diplomatic memoirs see İnan [1995, 2002]). He descended from a Kurdish notable (*agha*) family in the environs of the heavily Armenian-populated Bitlis. As an avid anti-communist and cold warrior, he repeatedly took the floor to caution that Turkish allies, the US and France, should not be manipulated by the ‘ominous’ Armenian lobby. For him, the parliamentary resolutions regarding Armenian genocide recognition in these countries were particularly dangerous because they injured Turkey’s friendly relations with its Cold War allies and were not favourable to the interests of all the states in question.⁴⁷ Diplomats were particularly sensitive and emotional on the topic, having lost several colleagues in the terror attacks by the ASALA.

Another cohort who regularly spoke for their respective parties were historians. For example, Professor Yusuf Halaçoğlu (1949 -) was an active contributor to the parliamentary debates. He is a historian of Turcoman tribes during the early modern Ottoman Empire, focusing on Ottoman demographics (Halaçoğlu 1988, 1991). Upon his appointment as the director of the Turkish Historical Society (THS) in 1993, a state institution founded in 1931 with some autonomy and grew in influence after 1980 as a gatekeeper of state agendas, Halaçoğlu emerged as the leading proponent of Turkish denialism. His stint lasted fifteen years, which is unusually long. In this period, he was the chief organizer of the Turkish intellectual enterprise against the Armenian allegations. Halaçoğlu (MHP) mentioned this in a parliamentary speech as follows: ‘We obtained documents on the Armenian genocide allegations that exceed one hundred thousand pages. Never forget that thanks only to these efforts can Turkey now offer to launch a history commission.’⁴⁸ After being taken out of office by the AKP government, he became an MP for the Turkish nationalist MHP. Coming from a traditional provincial background, he was more attuned to the MHP worldview compared to Aktan. Nonetheless, the conceit of his academic approach, such as claiming to give the exact numbers of Armenians who survived, migrated, and died during the deportation, was distant from the attitudes and opinions of the MHP grassroots and its cultural milieu.

Mümtaz Soysal (1929–2019), another law academic with socialist dispositions was an active ‘Armenian-basher’ in the early 1980s. As a professor of law and charismatic leftist dean of the prestigious Political Sciences Faculty of the University of Ankara in the 1970s, he was one of the ‘expert witnesses’ of the Turkish state during the trial of the ASALA militants who bombed the Orly Airport and killed seven people (Soysal 1985). Once he became a deputy in 1991 from (SHP), Soysal articulated his views on the issue that were grounded on his credentials as a jurist and esteemed intellectual. He presented his historical take from a Kemalist perspective: ‘We had thought that the question of patronage of the minorities [by the European imperialist powers] was over with the proclamation of the republic. Yet, the reintroduction of the fiction of the Armenian genocide and the creation of a Pontus question (...) showed that the Eastern Question is not over yet.’⁴⁹ Soysal became a proponent of the Turkish sovereignist left/neo-nationalism (*ulusalcılık*), sceptical of the European Union and the US, and saw pluralism and feminism as strategic plots against the Turkish Republican nation-state in the 1990s. Accordingly, he depicted the international recognition of the Armenian genocide as a calculated Western ploy.

While looking at the significant contributors to the debate, we did not encounter any female parliamentarians speaking on the Armenian genocide debates between 1960 and 1980. The only non-Muslim woman in the parliament during the period under investigation was Hermeni Agavni Kalustyan, of Armenian descent, who had served as the Head of State Representative in 1961. Overall, 25 of the 594 parliamentary speeches referring to the Armenian genocide came from female parliamentarians. Female representation in the Turkish parliament was and had been traditionally low. No significant gender differences were found in the discourse analysis of male and female parliamentarians' reactions to the debates on the Armenian genocide. For example, Birgen Keleş, originally a bureaucrat and a long-time social democratic politician, reiterated the denialist themes: 'What needs to be done is for Turkey to explain its theses, with great care and effort, on issues such as (...) the Armenian issue, to the European Parliament (...). I think that the prejudiced approach to Turkey (...) can only be eliminated in this way.'⁵⁰ Tansu Çiller, Turkey's first and only female prime minister, also presented a motley denialist stance: 'The [debate about] the Armenian genocide pops up every day somewhere. First, France, Italy, the Vatican (...). They put this agenda in reports (...). When a resolution was drafted regarding the massacres in Algeria, French Prime Minister Jospin calls for leaving history to historians. When it happens in their country, let us leave it to historians; but, when it comes to us, no words.'⁵¹ Some studies in feminist literature argue for the masculinization of women's communicative styles and elaborate on the strategies to survive and rise in such masculine political environments (Banerjee 2003; Campbell 1998). Political discourse is a typically male terrain, and women must adapt their styles to this hegemonic environment. Notwithstanding these caveats, this gender-neutral aspect of the discourses on the theme corroborates our argument that we do not hear authentic voices but authorized scripts reiterating the official state stance.

Conclusion

This article analysed the reactions to the international recognition of the Armenian genocide in Turkish parliamentary politics. It highlighted the factors that influenced the discussion: political party differences, the historical evolution of the debate, and the personal and regional backgrounds of the contributing parliamentarians. This exploration unveiled that mainstream political parties predominantly echo, detail, and reconstruct the official denialist perspective. The only exceptions came from Kurdish left-wing political parties. All in all, political party stances seem to shape the Turkish debate on the international recognition of the Armenian genocide to a large extent. Political parties deliver varied tones of the same denialist trope in line with their ideological orientations. Whereas right-wing political parties of Islamist and Turkish nationalist convictions avidly refer to the Armenian violence as proof of Armenians' inherently treacherous nature and associate themselves with the Turkish-Muslim nation, the Kemalists and national-leftists depict Armenian political activism as an accomplice of imperialism and affirm and reinforce their allegiance to the Kemalist authority and the stature of the republican state as an anti-imperialist bulwark. Although they agree on denying the genocide, their motivations differ even when they speak within the same lexicon. Historical contexts or the individual backgrounds of parliamentarians altered the tones of the denialist approach

but not the essential content. For example, until the 1980s, Turkish politicians did not develop a detailed counter-narrative, and the parliamentarians who represented the cities with a history of conflict with Armenians displayed stronger reactions.

Political parties denied the genocide as allegations that are (a) historically false, (b) unfair, (c) diplomatic manoeuvres and (d) national security threats to Turkey. The politicians most often defended these arguments were retired diplomats, bureaucrats, military officers, and academics. They spoke the language of dispassionate reason and intellectual authority. Their domination of the parliamentary discourse also renders partisan grassroots views inaudible. One reason that led to their omnipresence in the parliamentary debates is that the issue has mainly belonged to the foreign relations realm, making it a prerogative of retired diplomats. It is assumed to be an exterior to the political realm that requires a bipartisan stand. Thus, rather than witnessing major variations in their approaches reflecting the ideological differences of the political parties, we encounter an authorized script that all party representatives reiterate. While this predominant official stance on the debate affects dispassionate reason, we found a limited number of authentic and extemporized discourses on the genocide. These came from localities with a history of the Armenian conflict and reflected the hostility of local memories. Nonetheless, these, too, do not remarkably diverge from official denialism. The vocabulary and grammar of official denialism are strikingly unstructured, narrow, and repetitious. Historical references, beyond a few clichés crafted in the corridors of the Ankara academic-bureaucratic complex, are almost non-existent. The parliamentarians' views can not be taken as the mirror of the sentiments of their constituency or the general public. However, they are mediators between the bureaucratic realm and public opinion, and they play a critical role in making and disseminating the denialist discourse by fine-tuning its elements concomitant with their ideological proclivities.

Denialist voices that differed from the standardized state script reflect the manifold and incoherent memories and therefore needed to be suppressed. The same is true for the Turkish intellectual public space in which authentic nationalist discourses on the genocide had been suppressed in favour of the official narrative. These partially repressed or curbed authentic voices do not confront the official narrative head-on. They justify the Turkish killings as retaliation, in contrast to the official script that remains completely silent on this aspect. The absence of any authentic memory in the official script is not only conspicuous but also demonstrates the top-down nature of the Turkish state's denialist perspective. This monolithic official narrative is not an inherent reflection of Turkish nationalism. It is rather an artefact of the active involvement of the Turkish national security establishment in the debate. Indeed, the official denialist rhetoric emerged as a response to a perceived diplomatic challenge in the 1960s, and the genocide recognition debate was subsequently explained as a national security threat, as in the 4T theory. The issue turned into a taboo that serves to differentiate between friends and foes in Turkish politics. Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect a balanced parliamentary debate that can challenge the official perspective soon.

Notes

1. Available at: https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/develop/owa/tutanak_dergisi_pdfler.meclis_donemleri?v_meclisdonem=

2. Cumhuriyet Senatosu, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 4, Sitting 74 (29.04.1965), p. 847.
3. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 17, Legislative Year 4, Sitting 78 (18.03.1987), p. 605.
4. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 18, Legislative Year 2, Sitting 54 (12.01.1989), p. 167.
5. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 21, Legislative Year 3, Sitting 29 (12.12.2000), p. 69.
6. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 22, Legislative Year 5, Sitting 8 (17.10.2006), p. 181.
7. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 20, Legislative Year 3, Sitting 96 (02.06.1998), p. 211.
8. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 26, Legislative Year 1, Sitting 96 (01.06.2016), p. 317.
9. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 21, Legislative Year 3, Sitting 24 (05.12.2000), p. 112.
10. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 20, Legislative Year 3, Sitting 96 (02.06.1998), p. 214.
11. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 22, Legislative Year 5, Sitting 5 (10.10.2006), p. 322.
12. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 17, Legislative Year 4, Sitting 79 (19.03.1987), p. 640.
13. Cumhuriyet Senatosu, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 12, Sitting 52 (05.04.1973), p. 557.
14. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 23, Legislative Year 3, Sitting 31 (19.12.2008), p. 664.
15. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 24, Legislative Year 5, Sitting 79 (18.03.2015), p. 200.
16. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 24, Legislative Year 2, Sitting 45 (22.12.2011), p. 34.
17. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 26, Legislative Year 1, Sitting 97 (02.06.2016), p. 409.
18. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 17, Legislative Year 4, Sitting 90 (15.04.1987), p. 203.
19. Cumhuriyet Senatosu, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 12, Sitting 28 (06.02.1973), p. 203.
20. Cumhuriyet Senatosu, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 6, Sitting 26 (01.02.1967), p. 350.
21. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 17, Legislative Year 2, Sitting 108 (06.06.1985), p. 356.
22. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 21, Legislative Year 3, Sitting 24 (05.12.2000), p. 94.
23. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 18, Legislative Year 3, Sitting 110 (08.05.1990), p. 350.
24. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 23, Legislative Year 2, Sitting 32 (07.12.2007), p. 393.
25. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 22, Legislative Year 3, Sitting 83 (13.04.2005), p. 40.
26. Cumhuriyet Senatosu, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 4, Sitting 26 (01.02.1967), p. 350.
27. Cumhuriyet Senatosu, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 2, Sitting 83 (12.05.1965), p. 665.
28. Cumhuriyet Senatosu, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 4, Sitting 79 (08.05.1965), p. 261.
29. Cumhuriyet Senatosu, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 6, Sitting 28 (03.02.1967), p. 622.
30. Cumhuriyet Senatosu, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 12, Sitting 28 (06.02.1973), p. 203.
31. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 22, Legislative Year 3, Sitting 101 (24.05.2005), p. 208.
32. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 22, Legislative Year 4, Sitting 14 (28.10.2005), p. 61.
33. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 22, Legislative Year 4, Sitting 36 (19.12.2005), p. 668.
34. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 24, Legislative Year 2, Sitting 113 (30.05.2012), p. 319.
35. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 26, Legislative Year 3, Sitting 87 (18.04.2018), p. 725.
36. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 24, Legislative Year 2, Sitting 45 (22.12.2011), p. 71.
37. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 23, Legislative Year 3, Sitting 35 (23.12.2008), p. 48.
38. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 26, Legislative Year 3, Sitting 91 (24.04.2018), p. 57.
39. Cumhuriyet Senatosu, *Tutanak Dergisi* Term 4, Sitting 92 (21.04.1965), p. 204.
40. Cumhuriyet Senatosu, *Tutanak Dergisi* Term 4, Sitting 92 (21.04.1965), p. 231–232.
41. Cumhuriyet Senatosu, *Tutanak Dergisi* Term 4, Sitting 92 (21.04.1965), p. 232.
42. Cumhuriyet Senatosu, *Tutanak Dergisi* Term 5, Sitting 70 (12.05.1970), p. 363.
43. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 21, Legislative Year 3, Sitting 24 (05.12.2000), p. 112.
44. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 20, Legislative Year 3, Sitting 96 (02.06.1998), p. 210.
45. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 22, Year 1, Sitting 69 (22.04.2003), p. 400.
46. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 22, Legislative Year 5, Sitting 86 (10.04.2007), p. 30.
47. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 17, Legislative Year 4, Sitting 78 (18.03.1987), p. 597–598.
48. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 24, Legislative Year 2, Sitting 32 (09.12.2011), p. 129.
49. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 20, Legislative Year 3, Sitting 96 (02.06.1998), p. 212.
50. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 20, Legislative Year 3, Sitting 102 (16.06.1998), p. 435.
51. TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, Term 21, Legislative Year 3, Sitting 28 (11.12.2000), p. 38.

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