Early Findings of a Field Survey on the Perception of the Army by Non-Muslim Minorities Living in Turkey: The Case of Armenians

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This paper analyzes the early findings of a survey that was begun in November 2004 and completed in May 2005. The main aim of that survey was to understand some of the social and political characteristics of non-Muslim minorities living in Turkey. The focus of this paper is on how the Turkish army is perceived by Turkey's Armenians. Basically two reasons aroused my curiosity about their perception. One is my academic specialization in praetorianism, and the second is the fact that, as is well known, Turkey is one of those countries in which the democratization process has often been interrupted by military coups. Another factor that motivated me to attempt such a survey is the very limited academic literature on minorities in Turkey.

In Turkey, the army is not only a military force but also a considerable social and political force. The Turkish Republic, which was founded in 1923 by the army led by M. Kemal Atatürk after the struggle for independence, experienced three military interventions; two directly in 1960 and 1980, and an indirect one in 1971. Despite the fact that the efforts for democratization in the country have been interrupted by the Turkish army three times and that Turkish civil politics has always been supervised by high-ranking army officers, surveys[1] indicate that a great majority of Turkish people have always considered the army as the most valuable and trustworthy institution of the country. Certain historical, social, cultural and political reasons for this popular attitude can be discerned, such as the crucial position of military officers in the Ottoman bureaucracy; characteristics of Turkish political culture such as elitism, centralization of political power, hierarchical organization, the high importance attributed to and the great popular respect paid to the state; the role the Turkish army played in the struggle for independence and in the foundation of the Turkish Republic; as well as political and economic failures of civil political governments.

By means of this survey, I have tried to learn whether the non-Muslim minorities living in Turkey perceive the Turkish army differently from the way Muslim Turks do.

1 For example, see. TESEV's survey, Esmer 1999, 41-43

Historical Background

As is well known, the Anatolian lands had been home to many different ethnic, religious and cultural groups for centuries. A significant proportion of the population of the Ottoman Empire whose sovereignty extended over vast regions from Asia to Africa and Europe, was not Muslim. In some regions of the Empire such as Rumelia, Eastern Anatolia, and some parts of Central Anatolia, non-Muslim subjects outnumbered Muslim subjects.

The Ottoman Empire in its classical period was composed of two classes: the dominant class consisting of the Sultan and Sultan's *kul*s (slaves) on the one hand, and the *reaya* class consisting of peasants, tradesmen and merchants who were engaged in production and paid taxes (İnalcık 2002a, 179). This sharp distinction was not only political and legal in nature, but also represented a huge gap between the high culture of the educated administrative class and the folk culture of uneducated ordinary people.

As a result of Islamization and acculturation policies in large parts of the Empire, where more than twenty ethnic groups with different religions were living, the Ottoman lands may be considered to have been a kind of a cultural melting pot. This has led many experts of Ottoman history to the conclusion that it is possible to talk about an "Ottoman identity" (İnalcık 2002b). Some facts such as the integral appearance of a ruled class composed of different ethnic groups and religions, the recruitment of Christians into the civil and military bureaucracy, and intermarriage between Muslims and Christians seem to support the argument of a common Ottoman identity. However, on the other hand, the *reaya*, the ruled class, was not as homogeneous as it appeared. It was divided into many subgroups on the basis of religion more than economic criteria. Being Muslim or Christian or Jewish mattered in respect to a person's social, political and legal position. For example, even though intermarriage between Muslims and Christians was not prohibited, their children were not readily accepted as Muslims, and were registered separately and designated as "*Abriyan*" in the official survey (İnalcık 2002b, 16-17). Another example is the taxation system: Muslims and non-Muslims were subject to different taxes. The laws decreed by the Sultans forcing different religious groups to live in certain neighborhoods, to wear clothing distinguishing them from the others, to perform their religious rituals at a certain physical distance from Muslims, etc[2], also reflect the policies pursued by the Empire in order to discriminate against and keep non-Muslims apart from the Muslims, who were perceived as the essential component of society. Thus, it appears problematic to speak about a homogeneous Ottoman society. Ottoman

[2] For social life and non-Muslims in Ottoman cities, see Ercan 2001: 178-184, 280; İnalcık 2002a: 179-187, and Turan 2005 passim.

identity seems to have been based on political and legal status, rather than cultural homogeneity despite the cultural interaction between the religious and ethnic groups. It is worth mentioning here that the emphasis on discrimination and separation of the communities was not ethnic, but religious.

In order to establish a political, social and economic control mechanism on the non-Muslim communities, the Ottoman Empire had developed what has been called the "millet-system" that distinguished different religious groups living within the borders of the Empire, such as Jews, Armenians and Greeks, and provided for the appointment of the religious leaders of each community as head of the community (*milletbaşı)*. Each *milletbaşı* represented his community and acted as a communication channel between the palace and the community. He had a circumscribed authority to make decisions concerning his community. Living in the lands of the Ottoman Empire was considered a privilege accorded by the Empire to the non-Muslims. Despite all discriminative practices and limiting policies towards non-Muslims, they were not subjected to systematic coercion.

Until the mid-19th century, the political and social status of the non-Muslims did not change. However, the Empire's loss of military power and the nationalist movements spreading all over Europe as a result of French Revolution, forced the Ottoman Empire to develop new policies that changed the status of non-Muslims. For example, the non-Muslims were exempted from the head tax (c*izye*); with the firman of Sultan Abdulmecid, known as *hatt-i hümayun,* declared in 1856, all subjects irrespective of their religion were considered equal. But in the end, all these efforts of the Empire did not suffice to keep the Empire alive.

While the Ottoman Empire had been comparatively successful in keeping different ethnic and religious subjects together under its reign, the Turkish Republic that was founded on its ruins, as a secular regime, put an ethnic emphasis, contrary to the religious emphasis of the Ottoman period, on the definition of national identity, rejecting the cosmopolitan civilization as an artificial culture. Even though the new regime defined "being Turk" as feeling oneself to be a Turk irrespective of one's ethnic origin or religion,[3] the minority groups have never been considered equal to Turks. Especially in the early decades of the Turkish Republic, the idea of "creating a Turkish nation"[4] was interpreted by the ruling elites, as creating a society consisting of Muslim Turks by excluding non-Muslims. One of the remarkable discriminative policies toward non-Muslim citizens was to forbid them to be hired into the civil and military services. The fourth and fifth items of Article 788 of the new Civil Service Law declared in

3 *Turkish Constitution of 1924*, Article 88.

4 For some examples of the latest works examining the formation of Turkish national identity see Akçam 2001, Canefe 2002, Çağaptay 2002, and İşyar 2005.

1926 stated that being a Turk (*Türk olmak*) was a precondition for becoming a civil servant (*memur*) or for being employed (*müstahdem*) by the state.[5]

Another discriminatory action of the new state was the "*Yirmi Kur'a İhtiyatlar*" case (Incidence of Reserves). In 1939, the single party government declared that non-Muslim minorities were to perform their military service without armed education, using wartime conditions as the reason for this different treatment (Rifat Bali 1998, 5). But the actual recruitment of the discharged non-Muslims, who were now being used for labor-intensive work in impoverished conditions, was a clear indication of how the non-Muslim minorities were considered by the ruling elites. The Capital Tax, promulgated on November 1942 in order to increase tax revenues and also to combat black marketing, was another example of discriminative policies of the state towards non-Muslim citizens, since most of the tax payers were non-Muslims. For example, in Istanbul, 87% of the names on the list were Armenian, Greek and Jewish citizens. 1229 of them, all non-Muslims, who did not pay the tax, were sent to labor camps in Aşkale and later Sivrihisar (two small towns in Anatolia).[6]

The last incident to mention here, was the pogrom of September 6-7 in 1955 that began with attacks on non-Muslim businesses, houses, schools, cemeteries and churches by mob groups in Istanbul upon a rumor that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's birthplace in Greece had been destroyed.

All these incidents accelerated the migration of non-Muslim citizens from Turkey to other countries. Today, around 50-70 thousand Armenians, 20 thousand Jews, fifteen thousand Assyrians and one to two thousand Greeks are living in Turkey[7]. The aim of this study, as mentioned above, is to understand some social and political characteristics of one of these communities that for years have been regarded as "the others" by the state and by Muslim Turks.

The Scope of the Survey

The survey, of which only one part is presented here, consists of four parts. The first part, which includes questions about birth date, birth place, marital status, educational level, income, etc., as well as questions concerning the perception of self-identity, is designed to present a general social, cultural and economic profile of Turkey's Armenians. The second part, including questions such as their knowledge of the Armenian language, the extent to which they feel themselves members of the community, the frequency of their visits to Armenian churches, etc, aims to understand the interviewees' social, cultural and religious ties with the Armenian community in Turkey. These two survey parts were conducted by

5 Cf. *Düstur*, Üçüncü Tertip, Cilt 7, No. 198, "Memurin Kanunu" articles 4a and 5a: 667-668.
6 For the application of the Capital Tax, see Aktar 2000.
7 For the population figures of ethnic and religious groups in Turkey, see Andrews 1989.

my colleague Ayşegül Komsuoğlu[8] and me. In the third part of the study, Ayşegül Komsuoğlu, focuses on political behavior and attitudes of Turkey's Armenians, while, in the fourth part, I focus on the perception of the army by non-Muslim minorities living in Turkey, which, besides Armenians, also includes other minorities, Jews, Assyrians and Greeks, living in Turkey. The fourth part of the survey contains thirteen questions. Two of them aim at gauging the interviewees' familiarity with the army; four questions concern the attributed social status of military officership as a profession and whether the interviewees regard it a desirable profession; two questions attempt to determine where the interviewees rank the army as an institution among other institutions and how they perceive the function of the army; three questions evaluate what they think about the 1980 military intervention; and finally two questions inquire about their perception of internal and external enemies. In this paper, I present the statistical findings and my observations of what the interviewees said about officership as a profession and the army as an institution.

Methodology

The survey was implemented using a method that included both quantitative and qualitative styles at the same session. The reason for employing both methods was to minimize the unsatisfactory aspects of each method and thus to embrace a wider range of consideration.[9] The questionnaires we filled out during the interview sessions allowed us to restrict the framework of the interviewing session and gather quantitative data in order to underpin our observations and interpretations, while the interview method provided a freer atmosphere for the interviewee to express himself/herself and for us to gain deeper insight into the world of the interviewees.

The data of this paper are based on face to face deep interviews with 104 Armenians over the age of 17 who are Turkish citizens, living in eleven neighborhoods where the Armenian population is heavily concentrated.[10] The survey area was kept limited to Istanbul, because today none of the Anatolian or Thracian cities of Turkey have a significant population of Armenians. A preparatory survey held in Ankara had showed us that the Armenians scattered in Anatolia are less conscious of their Armenian identity than are the Armenians living in Istanbul. During the interviews, we also filled out questionnaires, while being attentive to the length of the interview sessions. The duration of each session varied from

8 Cf. her contribution in this volume.

9 For advantages and disadvantages of quantitative and qualitative methods, see Bryman 1988.

10 The neighborhoods are: Bakırköy-Merkez, Bakırköy-Ataköy, Bakırköy-Yeşilköy, Bahçelievler. Şirinevler, Samatya, Kumkapı, Şişli, Beyoğlu-Taksim, Üsküdar (Bağlarbaşı), and Kadıköy.

half an hour to four hours depending on many factors such as willingness of the interviewee, convenience, and even gender and age in some cases.

As the population of Turkey's Armenians is not officially recorded, we employed a sampling method different from the traditional one. Firstly, we made a list of Armenian churches, schools, newspapers, associations, and another list of Armenians we knew as our neighbors, friends, students, etc. We also interviewed the leading figures of the Armenian community such as politicians in local administrations, an editor of an Armenian newspaper, some members of the board of directors of the Armenian Patriarchate, and Armenian intellectuals, in order to depict a general profile of the community. We visited the interviewee at the appointed date and time. We employed the snowballing method, concentrating around twenty snowballs that set off chains of subjects, each of whom guided us to another. Another sampling method we used was to visit some places, without any appointment, such as homes, businesses, associations, coffee-houses where, we knew, Armenians lived, worked and spent time, and to ask them if they would participate in our survey. We were very pleased to find that, in most instances, we were welcomed and not refused. However, we also employed a control mechanism on our sampling to avoid similarity of samples. For example, we paid attention to provide a balance in number between males and females, but also to accumulate on some occupations such as handicraft, which is a traditional and very common occupation among Armenians.[11]

During the research, we did not hire professional interviewers since we had neither financial support nor any predetermined list of interviewees to give to interviewers. We also had to consider the sensitivity of the minority issue in Turkey; we were intent to observe the interviewees and feel what they feel, to hear their personal and family experiences, and also to establish cordiality between the interviewees and ourselves.

The hypothesis of this research assumes that the non-Muslim minorities living in Turkey may perceive certain political institutions and events differently than do Muslim Turks. This hypothesis is based on three assumptions: first, the unique historical experiences of these communities; second, daily life experiences they have as individuals and members of a community; and finally, the particular behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs that they developed as a result of living in a community that is relatively closed to other communities, especially to Muslim Turks.

In this research, the term "perception" refers to all mental and sensory processes that a person has about an object, a subject, an institution or a situation.[12] The working definition of "perception," here, covers all mental and sensory

[11] A large proportion of the male Armenian population engages in the handicraft of silver and gold.

[12] For the term "perception" see Laing-Phillipson-Lee 1969: 3-48; and Berry-Poortinga-Segall-Dasen 1992: 131-60.

processes accompanied with behaviors and attitudes, ranging from sentiments to definition, classification, naming, meaning, evaluation and finally cognition. Perception assumes interpenetrations, conjunctions and/or disjunctions between the person, who perceives, and what is perceived. The term perception I employ here, is not based on racial differences, but on cultural differences, namely, differences we learn through individual and communal experiences.

Perception includes many dimensions of a relation between the person who perceives and what is perceived. In this research, I attempted to understand three dimensions of the perception process of the non-Muslim minorities, who perceive, and the army which is perceived.

1. Discernment of the institution (the army and the officership) by the person, and a perceived relation between the institution and the person.
2. Perceived distance (remoteness-nearness; accessibility-inaccessibility) between the person/community and the institution.
3. The prestige the person attributes to the army, the officership and their functions relative to the other institutions of the society.

The Findings: Some Data and Observations

The survey data of this paper is based on interviews with 55 female and 49 male Armenians. The educational level is as follows:

Non-literate	2.9%
Literate (no diploma)	1.9%
Primary School	22.1%
Middle School	13.4%
High School	33.6%
Undergraduate degree (2 years)	6.7%
Undergraduate degree (4 or more years)	19%

One of the questions asked of the 104 interviewees, was "In your opinion, what is the most credible and trustworthy institution in Turkey?" The Turkish army scored highest, with 53.8% (56 of 104 persons), among the other institutions. The other institutions mentioned were the Turkish parliament (1.9%), the government (6.7%), the courts (6.7%), the Supreme Court (4.9%), the police force (0.9%), etc. The most remarkable point here is that 16.3% of interviewees found no institution credible and trustworthy. Age, gender and educational level did not make any remarkable difference in the respondents' evaluation of Turkish institutions.

Another question was "In your opinion, what is the duty of the Turkish army?" The results are as follows: "The duty of the Turkish army" is:

to protect the country against external enemies	20.2%
to protect the country against both external and internal enemies	60.5%
to put domestic politics in order	0.9%
to protect the country against both external and internal enemies and put domestic politics in order	11.5%
have no idea	0.9%
other answers	0.9 %

As is seen, most of the interviewees have a perception of "enemy," internal or external. What is interesting here is that the army is considered to be an institution whose duty is to protect the country against not only external, but also internal enemies. Again, age, gender and educational level made no remarkable difference in the interviewees' perception of the army's duty.

My observations support the data about the perception of the Turkish army as an institution: The Turkish army is considered the most credible and trustworthy institution of the country and as a guarantor of the regime against the groups of "internal enemies," which they have named as follows:

Radical Islamic groups	37.5%
All radical groups	7.6%
Fascists	5.7%
Communists	5.7%
Politicians	2.8%
Kurds	0.9%

At first glance it seems that the radical Islamic groups are perceived by the interviewees as an enemy to the country. However, when we deepened the interviews it was understood that the radical Islamic groups are perceived as an enemy and threat not only to the country, but also to their community in particular. Given that the interviewees regard the Turkish army as the most modernist, secular and laic institution of the country, it seems understandable that most of those who mentioned radical Islamic groups as an internal enemy of the country think of the army as a guarantor of the secular and democratic regime of the country.

The interviews revealed that factors such as the failure of governments to solve the problem of political violence and terror in the 1970s and 1980s, the lack of tolerance and reconciliation among the political parties, corruption in the bu-

reaucratic institutions, economic crises, etc. eroded the legitimacy of civil governments. On the other hand, the Turkish army is perceived as an institution uninvolved in daily politics, which are frequently perceived as corrupted in Turkey, despite the fact that it was the army that has always dealt with and manipulated politics behind the scenes. The role the Turkish army played in the foundation of the Turkish Republic and in the modernization project is another factor supporting its legitimacy and prestige. During face-to-face interviews, the other arguments explaining why the interviewees considered the Turkish army the most credible and trustworthy institution were its perceived role in protecting the regime and the relatively peaceful periods that followed the military coups.

In addition to the Turkish army as an institution, I also tried to understand what they thought about officership as a profession. The answers to the questions on the questionnaire as well as anecdotes, personal stories, personal opinions and judgments about officers they told us during the interviews, show that officership is still a desirable and prestigious profession. One of the questions in this regard was "What is the first feeling you have when you see an officer on the street, in a market, on the bus, etc.?" 32.5% of the interviewees said that they felt nothing special. Only 3.8% mentioned a negative feeling such as antipathy, inequality, uneasiness, while 32.7% of them said that they felt respect. Others mentioned some positive feelings such as envy (15.7%), sympathy (%5.3), and trust, pride, admiration, etc., each with rates around 1%. The total percentage of positive feelings amounted to 62.5%,

Answers to the question "Would you be in favor of your son choosing officership as a profession?" were very surprising, as non-Muslim minorities are not hired into the military cadres even though there is no legal obstacle preventing this.[13] 15.3% answered "I would definitely be in favor", 38.4 % "I would be in favor," 19% "I would not be in favor," 11.5% "I would strongly oppose," while others answered "I do not know" at 15.3%.

Another interesting point is that some of the interviewees who did not want their sons to be officers gave as a reason "because it is not possible for Armenians to be officers in Turkey," while some others claimed that "even if the Armenians are hired into the Turkish army, they are not promoted." Those answers imply that the interviewees perceive a distance between the army and the community, and regard both the army as an institution and officership as a profession, beyond their reach. Another point worth mentioning here is that the interviewees who held leftist ideological perspectives considered the army and officership as unsympathetic, unnecessary and aggressive institutions. A similar antimilitarist tendency was also observed among a small group of people who were artisans.

13 All Turkish citizens have the legal right to apply for officership in the Turkish army. However, it is known that non-Muslim citizens are eliminated during the exams for national security reasons.

In the preference of officership as a profession, gender did make some difference. The women seemed more eager than the men to have a son in military uniform. 56.3% of women and 51% of men gave a positive answer, while negative answers were given by 25.4% of women and 36.7% of men. Another difference between women and men concerning officership appeared when we asked the interviewees why they did or did not prefer this profession. Most of the female interviewees mentioned emotional reasons such as public esteem for officership, personal affinity towards officers, the elegance of military uniforms, while most of the male interviewees mentioned more concrete reasons such as a way to represent the Armenian community in a positive way, affirmation of Armenian equality, high salary, opportunity for free education, etc. During the conversations, some of the elderly women said that officers had been the most popular candidates for young girls to marry when they were young. Also some of the men told us that they had wanted to be officers, but were not accepted because they were Armenians.

Conclusion

An overall evaluation of my findings brings me to a set of conclusions which can be summarized in two points. The first is related to the status Turkey's Armenians attribute to the Turkish Army as an institution relative to the other institutions of the country, and officership as a profession. The second is related to the relation and distance they perceive between these institutions and themselves as a community.

The findings of the survey indicate that 53.8 % of interviewees consider the Turkish Army the most credible and trustworthy institution in the country. That such a level of trust is shared by more than half of the Armenians interviewed may be rooted in three basic assumptions. One is that the Army is the 'cleanest' institution in Turkey. This assumption derives from the belief that most of the institutions in Turkey, such as the parliament, political parties, and bureaucracy are corrupt. Another assumption is that the Turkish Army is the guardian of the Turkish democracy. And the third assumption is that the establishment of a fundamentalist Islamic regime in Turkey can be prevented only by the Army, which they consider the most secular and laic institution of the country.

The second conclusion derived from the survey relates to the perceived relation and distance between the community and the Army. Turkey's Armenians maintain their ethnic identity and their strong communal ties. However, I observed that they are less isolated than they appear to the rest of Turkish society. They have a high level of political knowledge and interest, and an awareness of political, economic and social processes. They discern the Turkish Army and its functions. However, they feel a great distance between the institution and themselves. They find the Turkish Army a supportable and prestigious, but unreachable

institution. Similarly, they look on officership as a desirable profession for both emotional and concrete reasons, but as one that is inaccessible to Armenians.

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