Transcending the nationalism of the Armenian genocide debate

Elizabeth Shakman Hurd April 24, 2015, Al Jazeera America

Today the world commemorates the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the mass murder and deportation of the Armenian communities of Anatolia, in what is now Turkey, by the Ottoman imperial government. We can expect to be inundated with detailed accounts of the horrors of these events, astute legal analyses of the international politics of genocide recognition and informed political commentary on the deep-seated and long-standing grievances between Turkey and Armenia as well as their respective diasporas and sympathizers.

Woven through most accounts will be the views and voices of the two protagonists — and antagonists — in this seemingly endless drama: the Armenian lobby for genocide recognition and the Turkish government. The Armenian government and a vocal strand of the global Armenian diaspora, on the one hand, insist on the international political and legal recognition of the genocide perpetuated by the Ottoman authorities against the Armenians. The Armenian lobby contends that the future of Armenians the world over hinges on official recognition of the genocide. Turkey, on the other hand, has vigorously and tirelessly disputed these charges, claiming that while there were casualties on both sides, Armenians who lost their lives unwisely sided with the Russians in World War I. In others words, they had it coming; it was war. To be clear, this is a blatant and irresponsible denial of history, given the massive numbers of civilians murdered or deported in horrific conditions by the authorities.

But is it possible that both sides in this political and rhetorical battle could be missing something essential? Is it possible that both sides' strategies and the narratives on which they depend are flawed? Are there ways to think and teach about the genocide — and the tragic regional and global context that made it possible — that avoid merely reproducing the terms and the mutual vitriol of this centurylong tug-of-war? More broadly, can we envision possibilities for living together that go beyond the confines of contemporary nationalisms and their violent and exclusivist historiographies? Can we temper the urge to prescribe and pursue international legal recognition as the be-all, end-all solution in such situations?

Armenian-American journalist Meline Toumani explores some of these questions in her new book, "There Was and There Was Not." Her autobiographical account is a thoughtful, often disarmingly funny story of her struggle to find alternative ways of living as an Armenian-American in a world in which being of Armenian descent means despising everything (and everyone) remotely associated with Turkey. She recounts her mother's

unsuccessful shopping excursions in suburban New Jersey in search of a bathrobe manufactured somewhere other than Turkey, describing the furtive look on her mother's face the day she finally gave in, quietly returned home, removed the tags and stowed a new Turkish robe in her closet.

As the lobbyists, experts and authorities weigh in on this tragic anniversary, the rest of us would do well to turn down the volume and listen to some new voices.

This issue is, of course, bigger than bathrobes. In 2014, Toumani published a piece in The Nation proposing that legal and political recognition of the Armenian genocide could backfire, harming Armenians more than it helps them by isolating Armenia economically from Turkey. In the book she adds that, paradoxically, such recognition would make life more difficult for Armenian Turks, including the roughly 50,000 who live in Istanbul. While she uses the word "genocide" in the book to describe the tragedies that befell Armenian communities in early 20th century Anatolia, Toumani cautiously contemplates the term's limits, astutely observing that it has become little more than a mode of submitting to or violating a set of guidelines authorized by those in power.

"Genocide," she concludes near the end of her account, "had become a term, a phrasing to be allowed or disallowed, and as such, it was less profound than any word I might choose to use. It was a secret password, a tool, an emblem — 'I am one of those who know' — and a submission to or violation of guidelines set by authorities."

I am neither Turkish nor Armenian. But it is important to speak out in solidarity with Toumani today for two reasons. First, she is asking questions that transcend the nationalist presumptions and state-sponsored historiographies that define both sides of the genocide-recognition debate. Second, she is right to suggest that the international politicization and legalization of this horrific series of historical events is, in some tragic sense, cheapening and impoverishing the possibilities not only for memorializing lives lost but also for moving forward as individuals and communities — whether Turkish, Armenian or Turkish-Armenian. As we are bombarded this week with the genocide-recognition campaigners, countered by the shrill and improbable claims of genocide deniers, we need to consider alternatives to both. Although the latter may speak with less certainty than their rivals, they speak with no less authority.

As the lobbyists, experts and authorities weigh in on this tragic anniversary, the rest of us would do well to turn down the volume and listen to some new voices. I teach international politics at Northwestern, and last week my class on the Middle East read Toumani's book. At the end of the second day devoted to it, a student said he spent time in Turkey as a

visitor and described the care he took not to raise the topic of the Armenians or their suffering at the hands of a disintegrating Ottoman Empire. He added, almost by way of an afterthought, that like Toumani, he was of Armenian heritage and found himself in agreement with her book.

We would do well to seek out less well-worn perspectives on this complex set of issues. Although we may have to strain our ears to hear their voices over the din, it's worth the effort.