Turkey's "Apology" and Image Repair on the Centennial of the Armenian Genocide

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Abstract

Image and reputation are key factors in how nations are perceived by global audiences. Current and historical issues can pose as challenges to a nation's reputation prompting the need to save face. The Armenian genocide is one of the most critical issues the Republic of Turkey has had to manage in terms of its global image and reputation. While the vast body of literature on the subject borrows from history and political science focusing on the mechanism of denial, this paper offers a communication framework to understand the rhetoric of Turkey's image repair. Turkey's crisis communication strategies vis-à-vis the centennial of the Armenian genocide are analyzed by employing Benoit's image repair theory through a content analysis of official statements and declarations by the heads of state given in 2014 and 2015. In response to the emerging political crisis, the Turkish government primarily employed image repair strategies of evading responsibility and reducing offensiveness with the aim to appeal to international audiences.

Keywords: image repair; crisis communication; strategic communication; genocide; Armenia; Turkey

Introduction

The period leading to and during World War I, particularly 1915, is considered the breaking point in the Turkish-Armenian history. The plight of the Ottoman Armenians, widely recognized as genocide by scholars, has had a defining role in Turkey's image problems. Although for decades the Armenian genocide did not receive significant global attention, this dark chapter in Turkey's history was revisited after World War II and, in particular, after the term genocide was coined. The Armenian genocide received more recognition with retribution terror attacks directed toward Turkish civilians and diplomats by the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation Of Armenia (ASALA) and Justice Commandoes of Armenian Genocide (JCAG) (Dixon 2010b, 2018). For decades, the Armenian genocide was addressed as the "Armenian question," the "Eastern question," or the "Armenian issue." The Turkish state's policy of silent and aggressive denial could not be sustained any further due to the impeding urgency to shape global public opinion prior to the centennial commemorations. Although international public opinion in regards to Turkey's position has been long been established as unfavorable, Turkey still saw an opportunity to navigate this crisis and shape the conversation. It became more imperative for Turkey to be able to amend its narrative and shape the conversation in its favor prior to the centennial, as its global reputation was already tarnished due to democratic backsliding and oppression of the civil society particularly during the 2013 Gezi Park protests (Selçuk 2016; Yılmaz and Bashirov 2018).

Existing publications on the Armenian genocide have dealt extensively with the state mechanisms of denial and official narratives of the Turkish state (Dixon 2010a; Erbal 2015; Bayraktar 2015; Göçek 2015). This article compliments the existing literature on the Armenian genocide,

offering an additional layer of analysis by introducing a communication framework to unpack the rhetoric of recent official statements around the Armenian genocide centennial. This study provides a framework to analyze how nations communicate with global audiences to repair their reputation in the face of a political crisis. Benoit's image repair theory offers a foundation to analyze the communication methods and content employed by states when they try to address an issue. This article considers the centennial of the Armenian genocide as an image and reputation problem for Turkey, one that it needed to addresses as part of its crisis communication efforts. To this end, image repair assumes that communication is a goal-oriented activity and that the fundamental goal of communication is maintaining a positive reputation (Benoit 2018). In response to the emerging crisis, the Turkish government implemented a number of image repair strategies, with the goal of restoring its image and reputation. In a similar study, Mueller (2004) utilizes apologia theory to examine the politization of genocide denial. He argues that preemptive apologia in House Speaker Dennis Hastert's removal of the Armenian Genocide Resolution forced the United States to accept the rhetorical analogue of denial.

In this article, I examine Turkey's image repair strategies in respect to the centennial of the Armenian genocide by applying Benoit's image restoration theory. I first provide a brief overview of the transformation of the Turkish narrative leading to Turkey's dialogue initiative, dubbed as the Armenian opening. Then, I discuss image restoration theory to lay the groundwork for understanding Turkey's immediate response leading up to the centennial of the Armenian genocide. Next, I provide a content analysis of the then Prime Minister Erdoğan and then Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's official statements in 2014 and 2015. In addition, I examine the concepts of just memory and common pain set forth by Davutoğlu. Finally, I assess Turkey's image repair efforts by connecting it to wider reputation discussions and the role of goal-oriented communication that states conduct in respect to issues of ethics.

Background Information on Turkey-Armenia

Examining the Armenian genocide and the events leading up to the decimation of an indigenous community is beyond the scope of this article. However, a brief background on the formation of the Turkish narrative, in particular, is necessary to further scrutinize Turkey's image repair strategies. Constituents of Turkey and Armenia have had a long-term disagreement on recounting the period of ethnic violence in early 20th century and the uprooting of Ottoman-Armenians from their ancestral homeland. Thus, Turkish-Armenian relations post-World War I have been shaped by two conflicting national histories and two narrations of those histories (Suny 2009, 2016; De Waal 2015; Yavuz 2020). The Armenian narrative, which many scholars agree on, broadly argues that the events of 1915 amount to genocide and necessitates some sort of reparations to the descendants of victims. The Armenian position demands that Turkey recognize the violent events as genocide (Libaridian 2007). Despite the global consensus on describing the ethnic violence in the Ottoman Empire within the boundaries of genocide, the lack of official international recognition is a barrier for reparations. As a result, Turkey is left with a moral and ethical issue at hand that does not necessitate any major policy change to appease Armenians – unless there is domestic and international pressure to do so. This legal loophole enables Turkey to navigate this crisis without facing major repercussions, other than damage to its reputation.

Turkey's narrative over the decades has been shaped by various degrees of official denial. The fate of Ottoman Armenians during World War I largely remained an unspoken subject in Turkey, a matter repressed and eliminated from the public memory, what many scholars describe as silent denialism (Gürpınar 2016; Üngör 2014; Göçek 2008, 2015; Zarakol 2010). The assassination of thirty-one Turkish diplomats and family members in the 1970s generated curiosity within Turkey and sparked a wave of global interest in Turkey's past. However, Turkey's official response at the time was reactive tactical moves to refute the accusations by aggressively denying the genocide and shifting blame onto Armenians (Gürpınar 2016; Bayraktar 2015). Göçek (2015) defines this strategy

as projecting victimization with the intent to defy responsibility. In her study of Turkish history textbooks, Dixon (2010a, 2015) proposes four phases for Turkey's denial in which she categorizes the first phase as absence. The discussions around Armenian genocide in Turkey have traditionally been addressed as the "Armenian question" (*Ermeni sorunu*) or "the so-called Armenian genocide" (*sözde soykırım*). Broadly described, the Turkish narrative argues that the incidents took place during a civil war within the boundaries of World War I, resulting in the deaths of Muslims and Christians alike. According to this narrative, the events of 1915 do not amount to genocide but are natural war conditions, precautions, and casualties (Gürün 1985; Şimşir 2003; Lewy 2005; Erickson 2016; McCarthy 1996, 2015). This narrative rationalizes the relocation of Armenians under the rubric of security reasons and is largely shaped by defensive arguments (Dixon 2010a).

The Turkish government's narrative across decades oscillated between denial, evading responsibility, and reducing offensiveness. Turkey was able to keep genocide accusations at bay for the most part of the Cold War era due to its strong ties within the Western alliance; however, domestic and international factors challenged this status quo (Dixon 2010b). Furthermore, Turkey's application for the EU membership had a number of preconditions mandating a more open society and embracing the past. As a result, Turkey's EU bid encouraged Turkey to implement changes in its discourse toward its Armenian minority and invest in the Turkish-Armenian dialogue (Dixon 2010b; Bayraktar 2015; Göçek 2015). Turkey's aspirations to expand its global influence and improve its global reputation were also factors in motivating a new approach (Punsmann 2015). In addition, the mounting pressure from Armenian institutions across the globe became a significant challenge to Turkey's global image. Public discourse on the Armenian genocide has softened in the second half of 2000s, curbing the Armenian taboo. Simultaneous to the external pressures, "the 'Armenian issue' became part of everyday political debate in Turkey" (Bayraktar 2015, 803). These multiple factors have led Turkey to partially abandon the traditional denialist narrative and seek out communication strategies to mend its image in respect to this issue. In more recent years, Turkish officials have been defining this dark chapter in its history as "the events of 1915" (*1915 olaylari*) as an effort to portray a more neutral stance regarding the decades-old "Armenian question" or "the so-called Armenian genocide" (*sözde soykırım*) (Dixon 2010b). As the centennial approached, Turkey geared toward image restoration efforts, such as issuing press statements, restoring churches, and organizing cultural events in appreciation of the Ottoman-Armenian heritage. This era is epitomized in highlighting the memory of Ottoman-Armenian heritage by acknowledging the Armenian cultural contributions to the broader Ottoman society, such as churches and other sites of memory, in aims to re-narrate its multi-cultural past (Yanık and Subotic 2020). For example, two main projects are the restoration of Ani and, later, its application to UNESCO as a world heritage site as well as Akhtamar Surp Khatch's restoration. In line with these efforts, Turkey renovated two major Armenian churches. Diyarbakır Surp Giragos Church – the largest Armenian church in the Middle East – was renovated with the joint effort of the Istanbul-Armenian community, Diyarbakır Municipality and private donations. Ahtamar Surp Khatch Armenian Church was restored in 2007 and was submitted to the UNESCO World Heritage Center tentative list in 2012. Maintaining cultural heritage serves as a status benchmark for states – in particular for those such as Turkey that feel ostracized, disrespected, or stigmatized in the international system (Yanık and Subotic 2020).

The official press statements from then Turkish Prime minister Erdoğan and then-foreign minister Davutoğlu are the most recognizable high-level image restoration acts, which deserve further examination. They are aimed at international audiences and symbolize a dramatic shift from earlier official remarks made by Turkish politicians. Additionally, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) introduced the concepts of just memory and common pain in order to further appeal to international audiences. In sum, Turkey saw the centennial commemorations as pivotal to its global image.

Crisis Communication and Theory of Image Repair Discourse

Image is the "perception of a person held by others which is influenced by one's own words and actions, as well as by discourse and behavior of others" (Benoit and Brinson 1999, 145). In an ever-interconnected world, image is more important than reality. For that reason, shaping the perceptions of international audiences is a vital tool in managing international reputations. Although the concept of image traditionally is related to corporate brands, nations, non-profit groups, and individuals too also worry about their images (Benoit 1997). The images and brands of nations are essential to how nations are evaluated and perceived by others (Loo and Davies 2006). For that reason, nations manage their reputations and compete for a favorable global image in order to advance their interests within the international arena (Wang 2006). Nation branding expert, Wally Olins (2007, 170), argues that nations have historically tried to manage their reputations in their efforts to create loyalties and gain influence in other countries. Nations as well as corporations occasionally face issues that endanger their reputation, which requires preventive and restorative approaches (Benoit 1997; Benoit and Brinson 1999). These issues or crises are attacks that tarnish a government's image where it is accused and held responsible for an action. At the same time, the act is considered offensive.

Ware and Linkugel's (1973) apologetic taxonomy has helped explain President Harry Truman and Edward Kennedy's speeches of self-defense and laid the foundations for Benoit's image restoration theory. In each of these high-profile cases, the accused chose to face his accusers and to speak in defense of himself with different apologetic postures. According to Ware and Linkugel (1973), there are four postures of apology: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. Denial is disavowal by the accused of the accused act. Bolstering, on the other hand, takes place when the accused seeks to identify himself with something viewed favorably by the accused. Differentiation is a posture when the accused offers a different perspective to his actions such as extenuating circumstances around the events. Transcendence impacts the audience behavior by moving the audience away from the accused event toward a general view of the accused's behavior. William Benoit (1995, 1997, 2000, 2015) offers a typology of strategies for image restoration. According to the theory, there are five broad discursive strategies image restoration strategies as a response to image threats (Benoit 2015): Denial, avoiding responsibility, minimization, mortification, and correction. The first strategy is denial, where the accused denies the accusation. The two variants of denial are simple denial and shifting the blame. In the former, the accused deny the performance of the objectionable act. In the latter variant, the accused may shift the blame to another person or organization. This strategy suggests that the accused cannot be held responsible for the accused act. The second strategy is evasion of responsibility with four tactics. The accuser can argue the offensive act was a response to another offensive act, such as the action of the alleged victim. Therefore, provocation tactic assumes that the offensive act is within reasonable boundaries. Defeasibility tactic suggests that the accused party lacked the knowledge or ability to avoid committing the offense. To evade responsibility, an accused party may also argue that the offense took place as an accident. Finally, claiming the act happened as a result of good intentions can be used as an evading responsibility tactic. The third category is reducing offensiveness of the event, where the accused tries to reduce the offensiveness by six different methods. First, the accused party can bolster his/her image in aims to improve positive public opinion; this intends to offset the negative feelings that may have arisen from the offensive act. Second, the accused can minimize the offensive act by suggesting the act is not as offensive as it seems. Third, the accused can distinguish the offensive act from similar but more offensive actions, with attempts to demonstrate the low degree of offensiveness. Fourth, transcendence aims to justify the act by placing it in a more favorable context. Fifth, attacking the accuser can be used as a tactic, which essentially aims to diminish the credibility of the accusations. Sixth, compensation aims to give the victim money, goods, or services to help reduce the negative feelings toward the accused. The fourth image repair strategy is corrective action in which the accused promises to correct the problem by restoring the

state of affairs existing before the offensive action or promising to prevent recurrence of the offensive act. The fifth image restoration strategy is mortification, which is when an accused apologizes and begs for forgiveness. Benoit's theory assumes that communication is a goal-oriented activity and that the fundamental goal of communication is maintaining a positive reputation (Benoit 2018).

Most of the existing studies on image repair analyzes strategies by corporations (Benoit and Brinson 1994; Benoit and Pang 2008), important figures, and celebrities (Benoit 1997; Benoit and Brinson 1999; Benoit 2004; Len-Rios and Benoit 2003). One of the most well-known corporate cases is the British Petroleum Deepwater Horizon spill (Harlow, Brantley, and Harlow 2011). Both President Bush and President Obama employed image repair strategies following crises during their tenure as US presidents (Benoit 2014; Benoit 2006).

While image repair is widely employed in the corporate setting, nations also have the need to manage their reputations. Image and reputation are integral to a nation's global standing. The US government's efforts to repair its image after the 2008 financial crisis illustrates how important it is to have a favorable global image (Chua and Pang 2012). A number of studies examine image repair strategies by nations (Zhang and Benoit 2004; Zhang and Benoit 2009; Peijuan, Ting, and Pang 2009) where nations had to save face. To illustrate, following the 9/11 terror attacks and the revealing of the identities of the hijackers, Saudi Arabia faced a major blow to its image. They employed image repair strategies of denial of connections to the incident and good intentions by offering financial assistance to New York and paying immediate visits to the US (Zhang and Benoit, 2004). Nations who have reputation problems due to past crimes have also employed various postures of image repair. As nations compete for a favorable image within international audiences, their ethics inevitably factor in their global reputations. Particularly the politics of acknowledge-ment and regret have pressed many states to assume responsibility for their wrongdoings (Bakıner 2013). Therefore, repairing image resulting from past crimes and wrongdoings have pressured nations to issue apologies. US President Barack Obama, on his historic visit to Hiroshima, expressed his regret by saying "mere words cannot give voice to such suffering" but avoided using the words "apology" or "killing" (Obama White House 2016). Other nations have issued formal apologies for their past mistakes. To illustrate, French President Emmanuel Macron apologized to Algerians who fought alongside French colonial forces and were left to be killed following the withdrawal of French forces (Associated Press 2021). As another example, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd issued an official apology to indigenous Australians for the past wrongdoing of the Australian government (Info.Australia.gov.au 2008). Japan acknowledged and issued statements of regret in regards to the Nanjing Massacre (Dixon 2018). In 2016, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made a formal apology for Canada's racist immigration policies in 1914 when a steamship full of Sikh migrants was not allowed to dock, causing the passengers to be persecuted upon their return to Kolkata, India (CBC News 2016).

Toward the Centennial

One can observe image repair strategies in Turkey's narrative. In this section, I will elaborate on the contemporary image repair strategies that, to a degree, replicate the traditional narrative. Dixon (2010b, 2018) argues that, when official narrative has shown some variation, it has been reproduced by the bureaucratic elites after 2000 as they replicated the defensive strategies in the 1980s. To exemplify, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement (2020a) is reflective of the state narrative, which argues that the "Armenian question" should be addressed by historians instead of politicians: "The totality of evidence thus far uncovered by historians tells a grim story of serious inter-communal conflict, perpetrated by both Christian and Muslim irregular forces, complicated by disease, famine, and many other of war's privations. The evidence does not, however, describe genocide."

Based on Benoit's framework, Turkey's traditional stance vis-à-vis the Armenian genocide has been denial and evading responsibility by utilizing tactics of provocation, accident, and good intentions. In this respect, Turkey has traditionally denied the existence of an Armenian plight and denied classifying the atrocities as genocide. The intractable conflict was rather coined as the "Armenian question" or the "so-called Armenian genocide" by Turkey's official historians and the Turkish state (Göçek 2015). Retired diplomats, retired military officials, and civil society were all incorporated to ensure the continuation of the official narrative. These individuals and institutions, acting as gatekeepers, shaped the discourse for decades (Dixon 2010a). Moreover, there is a multitude of popular and academic books that delve on the "Armenian question" in attempts to disprove the genocide and shift blame to external factors (see Halaçoğlu 2001; Şimşir 2000). Furthermore, the Turkish educational system has become a vehicle to disseminate the state narrative – despite that narrative changing over the course of decades (Dixon 2010a). The discourse presented in high school history textbooks (Dixon 2010a) and public intellectuals reflect the relative changes in the state narrative.

Turkey often resorted to shifting blame by accusing the Armenians for committing atrocities against Turks while minimizing Armenian losses. For example, in respect to claims of provocation, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs suggests that

> the Armenians took arms against their own government. Their violent political aims, not their race, ethnicity or religion, rendered them subject to relocation… Ottoman Armenian Dashnak and Hunchak guerrillas and their civilian accomplices admittedly organized political revolutionary groups and waged war against their own government. Under these circumstances, it was the Ottoman Armenians' violent political alliance with the Russian forces, not their ethnic or religious identity, which rendered them subject to the relocation. (MFA 2020)

The official stance of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicates that Turkey believes the Ottoman-Armenians were rightfully relocated due to provocations, meaning that the root cause of the conflict is Armenian provocations. To this end, the official discourse shifts the blame of the Armenian genocide to the Ottoman-Armenians. This argument aligns with Dixon's (2018) finding that "officials crafted a narrative that responded to charges of genocide and massacre with alternative labels and arguments" (55).

According to Benoit, accident is when the accused makes an excuse based on accidents. Instead of denying the occurrence of an offensive act, the accused aims to provide information that may reduce responsibility for the offensive act (Benoit 2015). In terms of accident strategy, the Turkish official website dedicated to "the events of 1915" states

> Whilst the Ottoman Government had planned for the protection and nourishment of the dislocated Armenians, their suffering could not be avoided under the circumstances of the time. Wartime conditions exacerbated by internal strife, local groups seeking retaliation, banditry, famine, epidemics and the general lawlessness of a disintegrating Empire all combined to produce a painful tragedy that was beyond any expected contingency. (Events of 1915, 2021b)

In this respect, the events of 1915, as it is typically labeled by the Turkish state, is a result of a number of accidental incidents.

The accused can sometimes argue that the action in question is justified on the basis of intentions. In this case, the wrongful act is not denied, but the audience is asked not to hold the accused responsible due to the good intentions behind the act (Benoit 2015). Along these lines, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs argues Ottoman soldiers in fact shielded Armenians: "None of the Ottoman orders commanding the relocation of Armenians, which have been reviewed by

historians to date, orders killings. To the contrary, they order Ottoman officials to protect relocated Armenians" (MFA 2020).

The narratives set forth by these official bodies fall under Turkey's traditional narrative. While still holding validity, these traditional strategies became inadequate in the face of mounting pressure approaching the centennial of 2015. As the international pressure increased and Turkey's image problem increased, Turkey sought creative ways to manage the issues. The Turkish government contextualized two novel narratives in its public diplomacy leading toward 2015. The first concept is "common pain/shared pain" (Davutoğlu 2014b). The "shared pain" articulation aims to build a common bond between Turks and Armenians through their losses. The main argument behind this concept is that humans have been suffering throughout time and that World War I was a period that inflicted trauma on all ethnic groups within the Ottoman Empire. Hence, shared pain means shared suffering, and it aims to establish a common bond amongst the former subjects of the Ottoman Empire. For that reason, this concept draws from familiar patterns of loss, suffering, and pain. The aim of articulating "shared pain" is to find a common ground to discuss history in a way that does not disregard the experience of either ethnic group. In his 2014 *Guardian* piece, then-foreign minister Davutoğlu (2014a) argues that it was a moment of opportunity to move forward and bury the "common pain." In his editorial, he employs various image repair strategies. He uses bolstering throughout the essay to emphasize the positive historical relations between Turks and Armenians and the way Armenians enriched the Ottoman Empire. He notes Ottoman-Armenian intellectuals, such as legendary composer Gomidas. He then uses defeasibility to provide an excuse for the accused crime:

> The power of the Ottoman Empire declined continuously in the 19th century. The loss of the Balkan provinces was a striking defeat which resulted in mass atrocities, expulsion and the deportation of Ottoman Muslims. A series of ethnic cleansings in the Balkans pushed millions eastward, transforming the demographic structure of Anatolia and leading to the destabilization and deterioration of communal relations there as well… While much of western history tells of the suffering of the dispossessed and dead Ottoman Christians, the colossal sufferings of Ottoman Muslims remains largely unknown outside of Turkey. (Davutoğlu 2014a)

Throughout the editorial piece he uses the term "relocation," which is a tactic of transcendence, situating the accused act in a different context.

The second concept coined once more by then-foreign minister Davutoğlu is the notion of "just memory" (Davutoğlu 2014b). This concept represents an approach that aims to interpret history from a perspective of justice. In Davutoğlu's own words, just interpretation means not viewing history with a one-sided memory. Therefore, the concept assumes recognizing the Armenian plight as genocide will be a one-sided memory and thus will be unjust to other victims of the time. In another 2014 opinion piece in which Davutoğlu introduces the "just memory" concept, he employs several image repair tactics. The first tactic is bolstering where he argues that the Ottoman Empire was a melting pot that did not suppress the Armenian identity; on the contrary, it guaranteed the existence of Armenians by integrating them within official structures. Davutoğlu further uses bolstering to reiterate his previous argument that Ottoman- Armenians were an integral part of the Ottoman societal fabric by mentioning names of famous Ottoman-Armenian statesmen. These two examples of bolstering suggest that Ottoman-Armenians were not marginalized, thus his attempts to debunk the genocide historiography. The second tactic he uses is transcendence, as he introduces a different frame for the genocide: "For Armenians, 1915 was a year of relocation during which exceedingly great tragedies took place" (Davutoğlu 2014b). Davutoğlu further states: "The years to and after 1915 were also a time of tremendous tragedy for the Turks in Anatolia. It was at this time that Turks fought for their very survival in the Balkan Wars, at Çanakkale, and in the War of

Independence. Actually, this was a time of 'shared pain'" (Davutoğlu 2014b). In this paragraph, Davutoğlu employs minimization, excuse and differentiation, using all of them at once.

Then Prime Minister Erdoğan surprised observers by issuing the first ever press statement on recognizing Armenian mourning by a sitting prime minister. In his message, he used various image repair tactics. The heart of the message can be summed up in the following statement where he uses transcendence, differentiation, and defeasibility simultaneously: "Millions of people of all religions and ethnicities lost their lives in the First World War. Having experienced events which had inhumane consequences – such as relocation – during the First World War, should not prevent Turks and Armenians from establishing compassion and mutually humane attitudes among towards one another." He employs transcendence to offer a different frame of reference for the Armenian genocide, situating the violence within the broader framework of World War I: "It is indisputable that the last years of the Ottoman Empire were a difficult period, full of suffering for Turkish, Kurdish, Arab, Armenian and millions of other Ottoman citizens, regardless of their religion or ethnic origin" (Events of 1915, 2021a). The same World War I framework is also exemplified when he states: "Regardless of their ethnic or religious origins, we pay tribute, with compassion and respect, to all Ottoman citizens who lost their lives in the same period and under similar conditions." He further uses transcendence to suggest the two narratives both deserve empathy and tolerance, thus normalizing denial: "it is natural to approach different discourses with empathy and tolerance and expect a similar attitude from all sides" (Events of 1915, 2021a). Erdoğan also attempts to reduce offensiveness by equating all sufferings, thus employing a minimizing tactic, stating, "Any conscious, fair and humanistic approach to these issues requires an understanding of all the sufferings endured in this period, without discriminating as to religion or ethnicity" (Events of 1915, 2021a). He adds, "It is a duty of humanity to acknowledge that Armenians remember the suffering experienced in that period, just like every other citizen of the Ottoman Empire" (Events of 1915, 2021a). Erdoğan further employs bolstering tactic by underlining Turkey's efforts, thus positioning Turkey as a peacebuilder while accusing the Armenian side for not coming to the table:

> The spirit of the age necessitates dialogue despite differences, understanding by heeding others, evaluating means for compromise, denouncing hatred, and praising respect and tolerance. With this understanding, we, as the Turkish Republic, have called for the establishment of a joint historical commission in order to study the events of 1915 in a scholarly manner. This call remains valid. Scholarly research to be carried out by Turkish, Armenian and international historians would play a significant role in shedding light on the events of 1915 and an accurate understanding of history. (Events of 1915, 2021a)

Erdoğan and Davutoğlu issued press releases in 2015 as well, employing similar image repair tactics. In his commemorative message, Erdoğan said, "I once again respectfully commemorate all the Ottoman Armenians who lost their lives amid the conditions of the World War I" (TCCB 2015). He uses transcendence to frame the Armenian genocide as a war causality where people lost their lives and defeasibility, thus using World War I as an excuse. We can observe defeasibility tactic once more when he argues: "In World War I, which ranks among humanity's major catastrophes, millions from all nations also perished within the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire." Aside from defeasibility, this also exemplifies minimization in which the Armenian plight is equated to all other losses during World War I. Similarly, Davutoğlu (2015) employs defeasibility and transcendence by stating many Ottoman citizens who lived prosperously and peacefully for centuries experienced great suffering during the end of the Ottoman Empire.

Conclusion

In an age when image is as important as reality, if not more, it is no surprise that nations are eager to find solutions to their image problems. While some are long-term solutions resolving issues, many

others are quick fixes focusing on the immediate – rather than implications over time. A complete overhaul of an image or reputation is unlikely and not an easy task to fulfill. Many nations suffer from reputational crises resulting from some kind of an issue in their current affairs or history. Conflict between communities and violence heighten these reputational crises. Acknowledgement and apologies for past mistakes is a very complex task for nations, especially when these issues are tied to their national identities. If and when various degrees of apologies are offered, they may be genuine. However, from the lens of international communication, apologies are analyzed from a goal-oriented perspective. This goal, according to the image repair theory, is to maintain a positive reputation as it pertains to the image.

The intractable conflict between Turks and Armenians is epitomized around the Armenian genocide. For that reason, Turkey's image suffers to this day from this conflict and the moral baggage it carries. The centennial was a litmus test for Turkey's image in respect to the Armenian genocide. In order to repair its image as a denialist state, Turkey's political leaders employed image repair strategies in their rhetoric to curb negative perception. Although Erdoğan and Davutoğlu's messages in 2014 and 2015 suggest a more fine-tuned narrative, the examination illustrated in this paper suggests that they recycle the traditional Turkish position in a more appealing packaging. For that reason, it is difficult to say whether the official statements or heritage conservation efforts have improved Turkey's image in respect to the conflict.

Turkey's then-Prime minister Erdoğan took a bold step, compared to his predecessors, when he delivered a message directly aimed at communicating with Armenians across the globe. Such a move was the first in Turkish history and is still considered groundbreaking, as it took place publicly in the format of press releases. Then minister of foreign affairs Davutoğlu also took bold steps, compared to his predecessors, issuing a press statement and articulating two concepts. Despite the steps taken to reach out to the Armenian communities, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu's statements fell short of a genuine mortification. Instead, the statements recycle the Turkish denialism within a new frame of transcendence, bolstering, minimizing, and defeasibility. While the content is repackaged in new frames, the medium is a new take on its image repair strategy. For that reason, these initiatives, have the goal to *contain and manage* the "Armenian question/problem."

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