

The concept of reconciliation and reconciliation studies as a field has not been sufficiently discussed in Turkey. The concept is often reduced to denote forgiveness and moving on, or allowing compromises to reach an agreement. This essay aims to frame reconciliation as a field, by basing it on the latest and current discussions. I aim to explain the concept of *helalleşme*<sup>[1]</sup> in this context, and discuss how we can place the current discussions within such a framework. In addition, I aim to suggest ways to address the relationship between transitional justice and reconciliation, as widely discussed in the literature.

A holistic approach developed over time in reconciliation studies. The term was coined long ago, for example, the German poet Hölderlin emphasizes the term in his poems from the 18th century. However, it was in the 90s that the term was conceptualized in the context of conflict, especially during the South African experience. It could be argued that the use and the discussion of the concept of reconciliation during the South African process of transitional justice, has been the reason behind the tendency that these two concepts are often associated with one another. Although the term came into use in such a context, it was also criticized for its connotations of Christianity. For example, Dan Bar-On, coming from the field of psychology and made invaluable contributions field of reconciliation, addresses this issue and suggests that reconciliation should be used beyond its religious meaning.<sup>[2]</sup> Consequently, reconciliation studies are defined as a multidisciplinary field and reconciliation is considered as a concept of conflict transformation that intersects particularly political science, law, theology, and psychology.

So how do reconciliation studies differ in terms of meaning and content from areas such as reckoning with the near past, transitional justice, and peacebuilding? In its simplest form, reconciliation focuses on relationships. It serves to improve relationships that are corrupted by war and massacres, turning to hatred and hostility between individuals (especially between victim and perpetrator), between groups (e.g. peoples in conflict), and between the state and the citizens. However, by now a consensus is built into the literature and praxis that reconciliation would be impossible without an establishment of justice, mutual recognition, and uncovering of the truth. For example, philosopher Fanie du Toit, in his great contribution to the theory of reconciliation, mentions the three pillars of reconciliation that he defines as intrinsically connected; he frames reconciliation as a forgiving embrace, restoring of the rule of law, and valuing political differences.<sup>[3]</sup> While the forgiving embrace pillar gives room to benefit from theological, mystical, and cultural practices, the rule of law pillar refers

to the criminal proceedings, which constitute the most fundamental mechanism of transitional justice. The third pillar, valuing political differences, is generally the most neglected one in reconciliation. However, even if physical violence is eliminated, there will always be political differences and differences of opinion. So, is it possible to bring about a democratic system of governance that can include these differences and such differences are freely expressed? If we put this in the context of relationship, which is the essence of reconciliation, the question simply becomes: How can the relationship between the state and the citizen improve, after wars and major traumatic experiences?

Fanie du Toit refers to the concept of “agonistic reconciliation” with reference to other scholars in reconciliation studies, such as Sarah Maddison. Agonistic reconciliation is a contemporary contribution to reconciliation studies, from the terminology of “radical democracy” by political theorists Laclau and Mauffe. Agonistic reconciliation is possible by drafting a new, democratic, egalitarian constitution that allows plurality, in a participatory manner, and by transforming the state institutions accordingly. Maddison mentions the achievement of agonistic reconciliation as a necessity for a change and transformation of systems that produce violence.<sup>[4]</sup> Such systems never dissipate because of a silence of the guns, but rather continue to exist in different modes, and produce oppression and injustice in other forms. Therefore, the theoretical framework developed by Maddison, who examined different global experiences such as Australia, Peru, and Sierra Leone, highlights the importance of focusing on interpersonal relations after a conflict, as well as building agonistic reconciliation.

Framing it on these three pillars, we can consider reconciliation as an endless, long-term, and complex process. It should not be difficult to predict that not only individual relations but also the transformation of relations between groups and between the state and the citizen would extend over a long time. But in such a process-oriented field, my claim is that a description of reconciliation with great ideals is both unrealistic and infeasible. Martin Leiner, a figure whom both took part in reconciliation processes and played a role in shaping the field of reconciliation, defines: “Reconciliation should be conceived as an overarching approach to conflict resolution that focuses on processes of rebuilding relationships. Its goal is to create ‘normal’ and ‘trusting’, and if possible, ‘good’ and peaceful relationships.”<sup>[5]</sup> This definition gives us two conveniences: First, it does not necessarily impose peaceful relations on a society worn out by armed conflict for extended periods. In the context of Turkey, it also

distances us from the false claims that “we are a mosaic, we have already lived in this wealth for centuries,” and “it would be sufficient to restore our relations to the golden years.” On the contrary, it offers the following option to a society that has put reconciliation before it as a goal: A common future can be constructed in which equal citizenship is ensured before the law, and relationships are based on respect that does not foster armed violence. Therefore, it does not impose the desire of a benevolent society in which everyone is forgiven by all, particularly on the long-oppressed (because such forgiveness and selflessness are often imposed on the oppressed). And second, while releasing us from this imposition, it also allows us to decide for ourselves about what kind of a society we want to live in. For example, in Turkey, where social relations are worn out and the trust of oppressed identities in the state is greatly shaken, we are not obliged to wipe the slate clean and naively act as if we are happy. Alternatively, another option might be aiming to live in a rather normalized level of relationship, although not perfectly embrative, but which includes equality before the law, elimination of institutional racism, and weapons being taken out of play. In short, Leiner’s definition, which the author agrees with, makes such an option intrinsic to reconciliation.

The most striking point in the debate of making amends that led to the writing of this article was the discussion on concepts. Articles suggesting to put making amends into a context of transitional justice followed articles rejecting the term due to its religious connotation or its emphasis on forgiveness, and instead suggesting a necessity to use terms such as “reckoning with the past”. However, I think most of these discussions were made without seeing transitional justice, reconciliation, or reckoning with the past as academic disciplines shaped by streaming through separate historical processes. Of course, I do not mean to say that discussions carried out without focusing on literature reviews do not matter, but their limitation leads us to miss the principles, values, methods, and opportunities that reconciliation studies produce and offer for our use as a field on its own. We need those offers, as much as we need to include more instruments into our thinking.

After this lengthy note, first of all, I have found the call for making amends to be positive, interpreted as a primary flare pointing out the fact that “we cannot ignore the past and move on”, particularly considering the position of the caller –i.e. the leader of the founding party of the Republic, which we refer as the origin of a multitude of problems. The call was a gesture of goodwill that requires continuation and content. However, if it is necessary to pinpoint the place of the call in the literature, considering its religious connotation and meaning in the

broader cultural context, we can place it within the scope of the forgiving embrace, defined by Fanie Du Toit as the first column of reconciliation studies. A criterion for a holistic approach is treating it as only a subheading of only one pillar of a big picture.

Finally, I would like to mention the relationship between transitional justice and reconciliation. These two fields often intersect, promote common principles, and at times involve common mechanisms (such as values and mechanisms of restorative justice). Various ideas about the relationship between these two areas have been in circulation for years. The proposed approach places reconciliation in a larger framework, defining transitional justice as a part of the reconciliation process, but as an autonomous field on its own, and thus deviates from more frequent approaches in the literature. Transitional justice particularly turns toward indispensable needs and demands required by reconciliation, as explained above: establishment of justice, mutual recognition, and uncovering of the truth, and therefore it should be seen as a part of reconciliation, but with a specific focus of its own. This specific focus is to eliminate both victims and victimization. Therefore why it is paramount to see transitional justice as a part of conciliation, but an autonomous one. Transitional justice as a field offers the best set of mechanisms for this focus, such as criminal proceedings, truth commissions, and institutional repairs and reforms. I would like to highlight the issue of autonomy yet another time. I find this stress important also to prevent interventions in criminal proceedings to serve for reconciliation, and the adoption of amnesty laws that are not favorable for the oppressed. The proposed framework to define the relationship between reconciliation and transitional justice might prevent any further disappointment of those affected by the conflict under the title of reconciliation due to them encountering impunity, especially considering that the same people had been struggling with it for many years.

We should remember that we have a good many resources for reconciliation and conflict transformation: human rights discourse, law, constitution, religious and cultural practices, psychological methods, political reconciliation practices, etc. (such as radical democracy). We can go beyond an eclectic or reductionist and most importantly, narrow approach if we can achieve using these resources without substituting for each other, seeing the risks according to the context, giving each necessary weight, and avoiding excluding one or the other.

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[1] Editor's Note: The term helalleşme broadly translates to making amends. For a discussion of the concept, see Yeşim Yaprak Yıldız, [Dealing with the Past in Turkey: What Does the Call for Helalleşme Mean?](#), #TJUpdatesFromTurkey, 29 November 2022.

[2] Martina Fischer, 2011, [Transitional Justice and Reconciliation: Theory and Practice](#) Berghof Foundation.

[3] Fanie du Toit, 2018, *When Political Transitions Work: Reconciliation as Interdependence*, Oxford University Press.

[4] Sarah Maddison, 2015, *Conflict Transformation and Reconciliation: Multi-level Challenges in Deeply Divided Societies*, Routledge.

[5] Martin Leiner, 2018, *Conclusion: From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation, Alternative Approaches in Conflict Resolution*, Palgrave Macmillan.