

Erdoğan's Condolences: Too Little, Too Late within a Steadily Changing Context

Written by Ara Sanjian

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ARA SANJIAN, MAY 8 2014

After the Islamist Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* or AKP) started governing Turkey in 2002, a number of Turkey watchers privately told their Armenian friends to expect a different approach from this new political elite regarding Ankara's official position on the Armenian Genocide of 1915. They argued that the Young Turks, who executed the genocide, were positivists, nationalists, and social-Darwinists, *not* Islamists. Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk), the founder of the Turkish Republic, which replaced the Ottoman Empire, had himself been a Young Turk. When, in 1919, he embarked upon his nationalist struggle against the victorious World War I Allies, Greeks and Armenians, many former Young Turks joined him because remaining loyal to the Ottoman sultan could have led to their arrest, trial, and conviction for involvement in the genocide. The modern Turkish nation-state, which Atatürk built, could not have been achieved had Armenians and Greeks continued to live in large numbers in eastern Turkey. For Young Turks-cum-Kemalists, recognizing Ottoman Turkish government responsibility in effecting the Armenian Genocide would be tantamount to accepting that many of the founders of their cherished republic were implicated in one of the twentieth century's bloodiest episodes. The ideological predecessors of the Islamists, conversely, were not in power in 1915. The Islamists do not idealize Atatürk's republic. It would be easier for them to come to terms with this painful chapter and thus end the ongoing antagonism with Armenians.

This scenario is yet to be realized. However, there have been noticeable changes in Turkish attitudes toward what they now call 'the events of 1915.' A number of collections of primary documents and key secondary studies on the Armenian Genocide published outside Turkey have been translated to Turkish and are available in bookstores. Next to these translations, it is also possible to find a few books, originally written in Turkish and authored by Turkish citizens, openly admitting the genocidal nature of the 1915 killings. Article 301 of the Penal Code, which criminalizes the 'denigration of Turkishness,' was frequently used in the past to silence Turkish voices who acknowledged the immensity of Armenian suffering in 1915. This practice has apparently now been put on hold. Most symbolically, it is now an annual tradition for a small number of liberal-minded Turkish citizens to commemorate in Istanbul every April 24, the anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. In 2005, a group of Turkish historians and intellectuals, critical of the official interpretation of 'the events of 1915,' were permitted to organize an academic conference, where the genocide was openly acknowledged. In November 2013, a further conference in Istanbul broached another previously taboo subject, that of Armenians who survived the genocide only through voluntary or forced Islamization. Kurdish deputies in Turkey's parliament have raised the issue of condemning and apologizing for the Armenian Genocide more than once.

While most of these developments have occurred under AKP rule, Islamists are *not* among those pushing for change. The pioneers of this new approach are liberal-minded intellectuals with ideals very different from those of the Islamist current. They dream of a tolerant, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural Turkish society, celebrating its own diversity. Moreover, this steadily growing movement, despite the interest it has created for providing an alternative to the government's standpoint, is still very small and remains largely confined to Istanbul. It coexists uneasily with the official discourse, which continues to be incomparably dominant not only among government circles and the political elites of the mainstream, but also across Turkey's many provincial universities.

Erdoğan's Inherited Dilemma

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It is very difficult for outside observers to decide to what extent we owe these changes to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the AKP leader, or if they should be seen as an inevitable outcome of the overall changes Turkey is witnessing since the end of direct military rule in the 1980s.

The Young Turk leaders, who executed the genocide, fled the country toward the end of World War I. The next (and last) Ottoman government tried them *in absentia*, together with a number of their junior accomplices it had arrested. All were charged with unlawfully deporting the Armenians *en masse* and massacring them. Mustafa Kemal, who deserted the Ottoman government in 1919, was opposed to these trials. Under the republic, which he established, the memory of the Armenian Genocide was pushed into oblivion. Decades later, when the descendants of survivors began demanding acknowledgement and compensation, Ankara adopted a rigid attitude, denying that any genocide had occurred. It mobilized its diplomatic corps toward that end and sponsored researchers ready to justify its stand. In the official Turkish interpretation, it is admitted that some Armenians suffered during World War I, but this calamity was primarily the fault of the victims themselves, of the Allies (Britain, Russia, and France), and sometimes of Kurdish and Arab tribes in the area. Indeed, almost everybody is held responsible for 'the Armenian tragedy' except for Turks as an ethnic group, the Ottoman government, and its army. Prior to the rise of nationalism in 19th-century Middle East, this narrative goes, the different Ottoman ethnic groups—Turks and Armenians included—had lived peacefully together in Asia Minor for centuries. These arguments constitute essential pillars of the official interpretation of the modern Turkish republic's 'Immaculate Conception'—to borrow a metaphor coined by Israel's so-called 'New Historians' some 25 years ago to describe their country's Myth of Origin. Numerous Turkish academics and journalists widely reiterate this government-supported narrative to date. They reject that 'the events of 1915' were genocidal by questioning the occurrence of massacres during the deportations. They also argue that Turks cannot apologize for something that did not happen.

However, over the years, bits and pieces of confidential information have leaked that at least some high-ranking Turkish officials have recognized during closed discussions that, in an international political atmosphere resulting from persistent Armenian activism, Ankara has found itself in a hole and it should stop digging. In 1986, former Turkish Ambassador Mahmut Dikerdem confided to the Greek Consul-General in Istanbul that

he had actually proposed in a meeting in the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs that it was to the national interest of Turkey to recognize the Genocide and blame it on the previous Ottoman regime. His proposal was immediately rejected, and from that moment his problems started in the ministry. He further told me that if his country recognized the Genocide, the Turkish authorities were afraid that they would have to face compensation claims by the relatives of the victims and perhaps territorial claims by the Armenian SSR.[i]

In 2007, journalist Pdraig Reidy reported that, because of fears that ceding an inch in the genocide debate 'might lead to endless legal wrangling in the US courts,' Turkish diplomats had studied the three Rs of 'recognition, recompense, and restitution.' Thereafter, legal opinion had shifted, and the Turkish foreign ministry had come to view that the possibility of the US House of Representatives passing a non-binding resolution affirming the Armenian Genocide would not open the flood gate to class actions.[ii] More importantly, close aides of Turgut Özal disclosed in 2012 that, soon after assuming the premiership in 1983, he had defended behind closed doors 'the idea of holding negotiations with Armenians to settle a dispute that has had great potential to deal a serious blow to Turkish interests in international politics.' In 1984,

he ordered his advisors to work on possible scenarios about the economic and political price Turkey would have to pay if Turkey compromises with the Armenian diaspora, an early Turkish acceptance of the term "genocide." Another scenario was also prepared. This plan sought to gauge the political cost of a Turkish acceptance of genocide within 20 to 30 years if Turkey is forced to accept it one day. His aim was to solve the problem before it got too late and through few concessions after reaching a deal with the Armenians... However, strong opposition from some politicians from his party and from the military led to him delaying sharing the details of the plan with the public, and he decided to wait for a more appropriate time.[iii]

This duality in maintaining a rigid denialist attitude in public, while privately exploring the possibilities of compromise, has undergone changes under Erdoğan and the AKP. While the state still supports the old interpretation, and Turkish

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diplomats and politicians (including Erdoğan) frequently restate its theses in public, at times they also depart from this inflexible stand and come up with “softer” interpretations of ‘the events of 1915,’ suggesting to Armenians, directly or indirectly, formulae which they hope would provide the basis for eventual reconciliation. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu is most active in this regard. New concepts like ‘shared pain’ and ‘just memory’ appear to be his brainchildren. This approach no longer denies Armenian suffering during World War I. It does not blame the Armenians for massively killing Turks, even committing genocide against them, and it shies away from using terms like ‘Civil War,’ which was employed in the past to establish some sort of parity between Armenian and Turkish wartime deaths. Last December, Davutoğlu went as far as saying that ‘we never supported the deportation. This is an inhumane act and it is not possible to approve of this.’[iv] The new approach still stresses, however, that Turks and other Muslims also suffered immensely during the war, and that their pain should also be commemorated. It refuses to see any qualitative difference in the circumstances under which Muslims and Armenians lost their lives in 1914-1918.

A Message of Condolence

Erdoğan's condolences on April 23 to the grandchildren of Armenian victims in 1915 is the latest example of this duality.[v]

The key sentence in the Turkish Prime Minister's message reads: ‘We wish that the Armenians who lost their lives in the context of the early twentieth century rest in peace, and we convey our condolences to their grandchildren.’ The message also repeats Davutoğlu's assertion that the ‘relocation’ of Armenians ‘had inhumane consequences.’ If limited to these two sentences, the message, coming from Turkey's chief executive, is indeed unprecedented, and the international media reported it as such; no Turkish leader had offered condolences to Armenians before.

However, these two sentences constitute only about 35 words in a 700-word-long message. The rest of the message reasserts old attitudes and positions, which the international media largely ignored. Yet, their dominant presence in the message made most Armenians wary of greeting the latter with any measure of enthusiasm.

The message reiterates that the people of Anatolia had lived together for centuries regardless of their different ethnic and religious origins. It underlines that Turks, Kurds, Arabs, Armenians, and millions of other Ottoman citizens all suffered during the last years of the Ottoman Empire. It condemns ‘constructing hierarchies of pain’ or ‘comparing and contrasting suffering,’ arguing that ‘the incidents of the First World War are our shared pain’ and that this painful period of history should be evaluated through ‘a perspective of just memory.’ Referring indirectly to growing voices inside Turkey demanding the official recognition of the genocide, the message welcomes the free expression of different opinions and thoughts and asks all sides ‘to approach different discourses with empathy and tolerance.’ However, it also warns that ‘some may perceive this climate of freedom in Turkey as an opportunity to express accusatory, offensive and even provocative assertions and allegations’ and stresses that ‘using the events of 1915 as an excuse for hostility against Turkey and turning this issue into a matter of political conflict is inadmissible.’ The message repeats Turkey's call for a commission with the participation of Armenian, Turkish and international historians to study ‘the events of 1915’ in a scholarly manner. It also takes pride in Turkey having opened its archives to all researchers. Finally, the last paragraph of the message pays tribute to ‘*all* Ottoman citizens who lost their lives in the same period and under similar conditions’ (emphasis added), thus reintroducing some sort of parity between Armenian and non-Armenian wartime deaths.

Most Armenians, to whom the message is addressed, will point out that while there may not have been Armenian uprisings in Asia Minor under Ottoman rule until the late 19th century, Armenian-Turkish coexistence in that period was still based on inequality; Islamic law and custom deprived non-Muslims of many basic rights enjoyed by the empire's Muslim subjects, like joining the administration or enlisting in the army. They will also object that the notion of ‘shared pain’ does not distinguish between the circumstances under which Armenian and Muslim deaths occurred. Hundreds of thousands of Armenians died as a consequence of a premeditated government plan. Moreover, unlike the Turkish state, which continuously denies the Armenian Genocide, the Armenian state and Diasporan organizations would argue that they have never questioned the suffering of Muslims during the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 or during the Allied attack on Gallipoli in 1915. Armenians did *not* cause these deaths, and they have

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never lobbied with foreign governments to silence public discussion of these events.

The issues of the archives and the proposed joint historical commission are of more concern to researchers. While the Prime Minister's Archives in Istanbul are now largely accessible, and many Armenian Genocide scholars have used them in recent years, they report that many key documents, which they expected to find there, are missing. This has led to the belief that this archive may have been combed, probably by the military regime in the early 1980s. The equally important Turkish General Staff Archives remain largely inaccessible.

Many Armenians are also worried that the Turkish government may simply use the proposed historians' commission to convince third parties to avoid discussing or expressing opinion on the Armenian Genocide indefinitely. Moreover, if the commission's Armenian and Turkish members will be appointed by their respective governments, they will be under intense pressure from politicians and the public to toe the established battle-lines, and if any side is eventually persuaded by the arguments of the other, the first reaction among their ethnic kin will be to accuse them of having sold out to the enemy. Such a commission cannot succeed unless there is a dramatic change inside Turkish government circles to face the past with courage.

These misgivings make many Armenians believe that the condolences, offered the way they were, constitute too little at this stage and do not provide hope for any major breakthrough in Armenian-Turkish relations.

Erdoğan's message also appears to many Armenians as being too late because, in recent years, they have become accustomed to hearing more unequivocal condemnation of, even apologies for, the Armenian Genocide from certain Turkish scholars, journalists, and human rights activists. Within this context, Erdoğan appears not as a confident leader guiding his people firmly along the path of confronting the past and achieving reconciliation, but as a politician desperate to keep up with the times and mitigate international pressure, without unduly antagonizing his more nationalistic rivals on the Turkish political scene.

Emulating Willy Brandt?

The Belge Publishing House, owned by the Zarakolu family, has issued many Turkish translations of books on the Armenian Genocide since the early 1990s. In the preface to the 1994 translation of Yves Ternon's *La Génocide Arménienne*, Rağıp Zarakolu suggested that a future Turkish head of government should emulate former West German Chancellor Willy Brandt's kneeling down at the monument to the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and lay a wreath at the genocide memorial in Armenia. This image has fascinated many Armenians since. It appears at the moment that Erdoğan will *not* be that head of government. However, when such a visit takes place eventually, future analysts will certainly look back at the Erdoğan era as a necessary step on this difficult road. How they will evaluate the role of Erdoğan the politician in this process is still difficult to predict.

[i] Leonidas T. Chrysanthopoulos, *Caucasus Chronicles: Nation-Building and Diplomacy in Armenia, 1993-1994*. (Princeton and London: Gomidas Institute Books, 2002), 28.

[ii] Pdraig Reidy, "Wrestling with genocide," *Index on Censorship*, October 18, 2007, available at <http://www.indexoncensorship.org/2007/10/wrestling-with-genocide/>.

[iii] "Late President Turgut Özal Worked to Solve 'Armenian Genocide' Dispute," *Today's Zaman*, April 23, 2012, available at <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-278371-late-president-turgut-ozal-worked-to-solve-armenian-genocide-dispute.html>.

[iv] "Deportation of Armenians inhumane, Davutoğlu says in Yerevan," *Today's Zaman*, December 13, 2013, available at <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-333980-deportation-of-armenians-inhumane-davutoglu-says-in-yerevan.html>.

[v] The full translation of Erdoğan's message is available in seven languages at http://www.basbakanlik.gov.tr/Forms/_Article/pg_Article.aspx?Id=e11bde56-a0b7-4ea6-8a9a-954c68157df9.

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