TURKEY AND ARMENIA: THE NEED FOR COMPASSION WITH COMMON SENSE

(TÜRKİYE VE ERMENİSTAN:
MERHAMETLİ BİR ORTAK AKLA İHTİYAÇ)

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Abstract: *For many years, advocates of the Armenian cause have worked hard and fairly successfully to get world opinion to put pressure on Turkey. Yet, if one leaves aside the word 'genocide'—which is a legal term with potential legal consequences to it—- the gap between Armenian perceptions of late Ottoman history and Turkish ones is closing. Turks do recognize and admit that the Armenian people suffered an enormous tragedy and that they continue to feel great pain at the loss of life and the uprooting of their families. That is why Turkey is ready to open its archives on this subject – and actually has been so for quite some years now. But if denial and concealment are not an option for Turks, equally it cannot be one for anyone else. I hope the dialogue on our common past will get under way.*

Keywords: *Armenia, Turkey, archives, dialogue*

Öz: *Yıllarca, Ermeni davasının savunucuları dünya kamuoyunun Türkiye'ye baskı kurmasına çalışmışlar ve gayet başarılı olmuşlardır. Ancak 'soykırım' sözcüğü – ki muhtemel hukuki sonuçlar doğuran hukuki bir terimdir – bir kenara bırakıldığında Ermenilerin geç Osmanlı tarihi algısı ile Türklerin algısı birbirine yakınlaşmaktadır. Türkler Ermenilerin çok büyük bir trajedi yaşadığını ve bugün de geçmişte yaşadıkları kayıplar ve ailelerinin yurtlarından ayrılmak zorunda kalmaları sebebiyle büyük bir acı yaşadıklarını bilmekte ve kabul etmektedir. Bu sebeple Türkiye bu konuda arşivlerini açmaya hazırdır – ve aslında bu uzun senelerdir de böyledir. Ancak eğer inkâr ve gizlilik Türkler için bir seçenek değilse, aynı şekilde kimse için de değildir. Umarım ortak geçmişimiz ile ilgili diyalog yakın zamanda tekrar başlayacaktır.*

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Ermenistan, Türkiye, arşivler, diyalog*

For many years, advocates of the Armenian cause have worked hard and fairly successfully to get world opinion to put pressure on Turkey. They have scored some striking successes. Several European countries, led by Switzerland, have introduced legislation which makes it a punishable offence to deny the Armenian claim that their people suffered genocide at the hands of Turkey.

The first victim of this legislation was one of the world's greatest historians, Professor Bernard Lewis of Princeton, who was successfully prosecuted and fined by a French court in the early 1990s for challenging the genocide claim. This was an extreme case but the Armenian movement has succeeded in many countries in effectively barring any historical discussion which disputes their version. Professor Justin McCarthy, the most distinguished specialist on late Ottoman demography, has produced valuable work in this area—but it is virtually ignored. Other scholars such as Prof. Jeremy Salt of Bilkent University have repeatedly found that revisionist articles on Ottoman Armenian history simply do not get published by mainstream Western publications.

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Yet, if one leaves aside the word 'genocide'—which is a legal term with potential legal consequences to it—- the gap between Armenian perceptions of late Ottoman history and Turkish ones is closing. Turks do recognize and admit that the Armenian people suffered an enormous tragedy and that they continue to feel great pain at the loss of live and the uprooting of their families.

Today denialism is not an option. For countries and cultures to coexist successfully, they have to be able to face their common past. If we can do so, our region, the Eastern Mediterranean, will be able to overcome its conflicts and divisions. If we cannot face our past, then we shall spend much of our future in futile arguments and conflicts.

That is why Turkey is ready to open its archives on this subject – and actually has been so for quite some years now. But if denial and concealment are not an option for Turks, equally it cannot be one for anyone else. I hope the dialogue on our common past will get under way. But it must not be based simply on a narrow and perhaps selective view of the past. It needs to take in the whole picture.

So let us look at the background against which the Armenian tragedy—and others—took place. The first discovery we make when we do that is that the Armenians were not the only victims of history. The Ottoman Empire perished fighting a cruel war which claimed a horrific death toll in which famine and disease killed even more people than direct hostilities. Over 3 million people died during that war in the lands that are now Turkey. Over two million – probably about 2.3 million of them—were Muslim. Ottoman Muslims had begun the 19th century as the undisputed ruling elite of a world empire. But by 1914, they were a people fighting for their survival. Two years earlier, for example, the empire had lost most of its Balkan territories in the Balkan Wars. Just over half of the people in those lands were Muslims. The war brought death, disease, and expulsion for several million people—their descendants, immigrants from the Balkan Wars, are one of the biggest groups in Turkey today.

The casualty figures for the break up of the Ottoman Empire also look terrible when viewed from another angle. Between 1821 – the beginning of the Greek War of Independence and 1923, the end of the Turkish War of independence around 5.5 million people died. They were Ottoman Muslims who were the casualties of the successful expansion of the new nationalisms in the Balkans, Anatolia, and the Caucasus. The rest of the world has taken very little interest in these people. And for the most part there are no memorials to them.

I naturally feel strong sympathy for them—though without vindictiveness. The different people of the Ottoman Empire, Turks, Greeks, Armenians, and others should find ways of burying their differences and looking to the future. We could all have grievances. My family comes originally from a town in the Balkans which is now Greece and we were forced to leave and seek refuge in Turkey. Close members of my family who passed away only a few years ago could actually speak Greek. So I feel something in common with everyone in the Late Ottoman Empire, regardless of their language or religion, who was uprooted and forced to leave the homes. But I have noticed that when I speak of this to some of my friends in public life outside Turkey, I get little or no attention from them. They are solely concerned with the adversaries of the Ottoman Empire and their plight.

And I notice that when prominent figures and senior officials call on Turkey and the Turks to come to terms with their past and open up on the Armenian issue, they invariably show not the least awareness of the side of the story in which millions of Ottoman were victims and that this story gets its place in the history books of the Western world.

The reason for this indifference is not just lack of historical knowledge – though that is part of the story. It is also of course that the migrations of displaced Ottoman Muslims from the Balkans, Russia, and the Caucasus, into Turkey is not a political issue today. The descendants of those unfortunate people built a new life for themselves in Turkey and though they often remember that they came from this or that Balkan state or Russia. The only people in Turkey with a strong interest in their pre-Anatolian past are from the north of the Black Sea—Circassians, Crimean Tartars, and Chechens.

The experience of the former Christian nationalities of the Ottoman Empire is very different. Though many of them prospered materially in exile – one thinks of Aristotle Onassis and of Nubar Gulbenkian—they fostered a constant interest in their homeland, writing books, engaging with Western public opinion, and creating powerful narratives. It is notable that the second and third generations were different from Turkey. In the main they were much more hostile to Turkey and the Turks than their parents had been.

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The Muslim subjects of Ottoman Empire who came to Turkey, no matter how great the disasters and persecution that they were fleeing, had a new life in a secure country reborn out of the ashes of war. They could afford to forget. Armenians in exile had only their memories of suffering and upheaval to accompany them. It is natural that they clung to those memories as their only inheritance.

It was in the 1970s – more or less exactly half a century after the end of World War One and the Turkish War of Independence—that fringe Armenian groups began a terrorist campaign of assassination against Turkish diplomats and other officials which claimed about 45 innocent victims in cities as far apart as Sydney, Boston, Paris, and Geneva. The confrontation over Cyprus from 1974 onwards is part of the story.

Another part of it, I suspect, is irredentism. Armenians and Greeks never forgot that they planned to follow the precedent of the Balkans and establish Christian states in Anatolia. The Armenian nationalists of course had been trapped by their nationalism in a particularly tragic situation. They aspired from the 1840s or 1850s to set up an independent state in six remote vilayets of eastern Anatolia, but in this wild and very poor territory, they were below

half the population. Moreover many Armenians were unwilling to join this movement. Those who stayed outside politics and engage in trade became very wealthy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These moderates were themselves often the targets of Armenian terrorism.

Today—nearly a century on—the irredentist dream is more unreal than ever in Turkey, though in Azerbaijan and Armenian, there are serious unresolved problems. Nearly a million people—Muslim Azeri farmers—were driven off their lands in Nagorno Karabagh in 1990-92. The world paid no attention to their plight as refugees, indeed for a while there was actually an Armenian-inspired law in the USA (now repealed) preventing these unfortunate people from getting any American aid. Is it not curious that the politicians of France, Switzerland, and the USA pay more attention to upheavals many decades ago than to those happening in their own time?

The greater openness on the dark times in Ottoman history and also on the contribution made to the Empire by its Greek and Armenian peoples is something to be welcome. There is some force in the claims of some Armenian writers that Turkey has forgotten the Armenian strand in its past—though I am not sure that we have forgotten that more than Greece, Armenia, and the Balkan countries have downplayed the Turkish and Ottoman elements in their own past.

The decade we are now entering is a decade of centenaries: the Balkan War, World War One, its upheavals and the sufferings of all its people including the Armenian forced march and exile, then of the foreign invasion of Anatolia, and finally of the Turkish War of Independence and the establishment of the Turkish Republic. A centenary is a time to live through old memories but also to overcome them. In Western Europe, war anniversaries are now shared occasions in which representatives of all sides take part.

How good it would be if we could do the same for those in our past as Turks and Armenians and Greeks. But for that we must resume dialogue. Dialogue is not one side saying only 'You were guilty' and the other saying 'Yes I was.' It must be more than that, a heart-searching conducted on a fair and equal footing. Those who call on Turkey to alter its attitude towards its past seem to forget that it was not the Turkish side which broke off the dialogue, both with the diaspora and between Ankara and Yerevan. Let us hope true dialogue can be resumed. How good it would be if, in the years ahead, both peoples were able to stand side by side and lay wreaths together in memory of all who fell. That would be both the best way to honour the memory of their suffering and also the way to ensure that their descendants inherit the better world they dreamed of.