"ALL THE TABOOS … WILL BE BROKEN"

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Editorial, 29 November 2009

In a recent article in the Turkish daily Hürriyet Vercihan Ziflioğlu, quoting Hasan Saltuk, stated, "All the taboos of this country will be broken and, in the future, there will not be anything that cannot be spoken about."
Saltuk is the author of a soon-to-be-published book about the "Dersim Operation" of 1938. According to some accounts, close to 70,000 civilians were killed in that massacre. Contrary to official history that the "operation" was to quell a Kurdish tribal insurrection, Saltuk maintains, "the fundamental reason behind the operation was that the region was home to Alevis" and "they were merely Armenians who had changed their identities".

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In a development related to the Hürriyet article, filmmaker Nazahat Gundogan will release a movie about the Dersim Massacre. The documentary was three years in the making. In an interview with Turkish NTV, she spoke of "hundreds" of orphaned girls who were taken by or given to officers' families to be "civilized" and taught Turkish.
During the "operation" the Turkish Armed Forces used aircraft for reconnaissance purposes and for bombardment. Among the pilots was Kemal Atatürk's adopted daughter Sabiha Gökçen, the world's first female combat pilot. It is said that she was of Armenian origin, and she flew off without dropping a single bomb.

In yet another development, the Dersim Massacre was recently the subject of a heated discussion in the Turkish parliament.

Following these positive signals, one wonders whether all the taboos truly "will be broken" in Turkey, ultimately leading to a free discussion of the Genocide of the Armenians. Will official Turkey finally face its past? At least one Kurdish parliamentarian, Selahattin Demitras, has stepped forward and spoken the truth. Will others follow him?

In recent years we have seen Turkish writers, journalists, artists, left-wing intellectuals come forth and acknowledge the Genocide of the Armenians. The voice of these righteous and brave Turks seems to be getting louder. Moreover, since the assassination of Hrant Dink and the publication of the "I apologize" document, some Turkish media have begun to broach the question of the Genocide with greater frequency than in previous years, although still not spelling out the "dreaded" G word.

When a person with the stature of Hürriyet's editor-in-chief asks, "If Dersim was a massacre, what was the other thing?" the answer is pretty clear, although he does not spell it out. Bloggers on the Hürriyet site have answered for him – "Genocide!"

How representative are these righteous Turks? Are they spokesmen of a groundswell of public opinion a la "We Are All Hrant Dink" or are they an insignificant group who are--whether they know it or not--acting as a fig leaf for official Turkey? Put another way, is the government giving them some leeway to boost Turkey's credentials as a democratic and civilized society, worthy of EU membership? Are these righteous Turks being manipulated by reactionary Turkey the way Young Turks misled and manipulated Armenian politicians in Istanbul before 1915? Of course, Ankara could also be using these intellectuals to encourage Armenians to bring down their guard.

To our knowledge there are no reputable surveys to gauge Turkish public opinion about the Genocide of Armenians. Based on postings on internet sites by ordinary Turks, it is fair to say that the public is overwhelmingly ignorant of the facts. It is also motivated by false patriotism and is unwilling to listen to voices that appear here and there, questioning the official narrative.

Not surprisingly, the "scholarship" of Bernard Lewis and Stanford J. Shaw are frequently invoked by Turkish posters even in respect to the Dersim Massacre. They argue that since these "historians" have not mentioned the massacre, it did not happen.

Turkophile Europeans, especially those with vested interests in Turkey, have promoted the recent rapprochement of Turkey and Armenia as positive developments. These voices from Europe are eager to grab every chance to claim that Turkey has progressed and matured towards establishing genuine democracy. To make their case, these apologists of Turkey point out that the country introduced changes to its penal code 301, following Europe's insistence. It is true that some changes were made on April 30, 2008. However, these did not go far enough. The principal alterations were limited to the substitution of "Turkishness" with "Turkish nation", the reduction of the maximum penalty from three years to two, and requiring the permission of the justice minister to file a case". The dictatorial and racist spirit has remained unchanged.

No wonder novelist Elif Şafak has said, "The Article has a chilling effect on free expression". Meanwhile, Nobel Prize-winner Orhan Pamuk has become a hate figure in his homeland, and so worried in his and his family's safety that he has moved to New York for the time being.

Yes, we hope that "All the taboos … will be broken … in the future", but as long as the hideous article 301 and the operatives of the old guard are in place, nothing can be taken for granted. Neither the

good intentions and the apologies, nor the lofty expressions of the righteous Turks should veer us from being ever vigilant and circumspect. We've learned our lesson only too well!

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