EMBRACING THE GLOBAL REPARATIONS MOVEMENT

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By George Aghjayan, The Armenian Weekly, 22 June 2010
The nature of the pursuit for justice for the genocide committed against the Armenian people has changed at an ever-increasing pace. As we look back over the years since the horrific crime was committed, there have been many successes and some failures, but the altered environment is unmistakable. As we approach the 100th anniversary in 5 years, we must be prepared for further acceleration and remain vigilant in defending our rights.

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Unfortunately, a number of slogans, often repeated by our adversaries, have become accepted as truths even within the Armenian community. These misconceptions often sound reasonable on the surface but actually are nonsense and, worse, convey a dangerous cynicism.
For instance, particularly offensive is the notion that use of the term genocide is a barrier to dialogue between victim and perpetrator. In the halls of the United States capitol and repeated mechanically in the media, this justification has been used to scuttle legislative recognition of the Armenian Genocide. The offensiveness of this becomes even more apparent when one realizes that the current “dialogue” between Turkey and Armenia has been manufactured with the sole purpose of delaying the inevitable just resolution.

Logic demands recognition as a prerequisite to the process of healing. The demise of the misnamed Turkish Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC) and the recent protocols between the governments of Armenia and Turkey, as well as other such initiatives over the past decade, are proof of that. Sincere dialogue can only begin with proper acknowledgment of the crime.

Even our own rhetoric can be harmful. United States recognition of the genocide, which should more appropriately be termed reaffirmation, has been elevated to the point of being considered a cure for various ills. It is often stated that recognition will help prevent future genocide or end the denial of the genocide. Yet we know that recognition of the Jewish Holocaust, which is one of the most widely written about events in history, has not stopped the occurrence of genocide nor even stopped its denial by those with malicious agendas.

By misrepresenting the purpose of genocide recognition, we run the risk of disillusioning our supporters. Viewing recognition as the objective, as opposed to the first step in a process, also leads to inappropriate strategies for success.

The purpose of the original crime was to end any possibility of an Armenian nation being formed on

our ancestral lands. It is undeniable that this objective has not changed in 95 years. The current illegal and immoral blockade of Armenia, the aggressive denial of the Armenian Genocide around the world and the devious disruption of community solidarity continue to victimize us to this day.

Restorative justice is clearly not possible given the extent of the crime. Any just resolution, however imperfect, must begin with ensuring the security and perpetuation of the Republic of Armenia. Reparations and restitution of land are necessary, but not sufficient to cure the scourge of genocide. One can point out that, again, the conviction of those responsible for the Holocaust and subsequent reparations paid to the victims have not stopped genocide. But that can be attributed to the Holocaust being an exception rather than the rule. What is needed is consistent treatment of all perpetrators of genocide. While progress has been made, there is still a long way to go.

Thus, the call for reparations for the Armenian Genocide is part of a global reparations movement and we can leverage greatly from what is at its core a human rights movement.

Yet this is not our sole objective. While the issue is surely much more complex than what I have described, nonetheless Turkey and Armenia, Turks and Armenians can not move forward without the necessary progression of recognition, reparations, and restitution.

The state sponsored denial of the Armenian Genocide by the government of Turkey has largely been responsible for increasing public awareness of the crime to the point of near universal acceptance. Again, there will always be those with the motivation to deny known genocides, but their existence is not evidence of any controversy over the facts of history.

Interestingly, the tactics employed by the Turkish government have led to Armenian Genocide recognition being used by various nations to extract political concessions from Turkey. The vicious cycle has led to the current environment where the threat of genocide recognition has been diluted by having already been achieved. Thus, we see a diminished ability to extract concessions from Turkey and greater independence of its foreign policy from United States interests.

Without doubt, the current environment is fluid and so complex as to make analysis difficult, if not impossible. Each player has interests and objectives that must be accounted for, but it is a mistake to simplistically view it as a conflict between moral concerns and cold hard politics. It is critically important to not allow our cause to be so limited.

The reality is that the solution for Turkey is easily achieved and insignificant when compared to its desired economic future. Make no mistake; much of Turkey's foreign policy initiatives can be traced to a desire for regional economic supremacy. Turkey desires to expand its role as a regional energy hub, as well as supplier of goods to both Europe and the Middle East. These objectives can only be enhanced, if not achieved, along with greater democracy in Turkey, by a just resolution to the Armenian Genocide that goes beyond hollow and insincere acknowledgment.

This is not based simply on idealism, but the lessons of history have taught us what is achievable

when willed by enough people.

On April 24 and 25, a conference took place in Ankara where some participants discussed reparations for the Armenian Genocide. A Turkish participant spoke clearly and bravely about the need for reparations. It will be the final insult to the memory of the victims if we, their descendants, in the comfort of our lives, simply beg for acknowledgment while the number of those in Turkey risk much more to demand justice be served.

We must expect more, we must do our part for the global reparations movement. That is our obligation for those that died, those that survived, and those that continue to strive for justice.

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