GENOCIDE ACKNOWLEDGMENT: A DEAD END?

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By David B. Boyajian, Watertown MA

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Genocide acknowledgment is different. Armenians, and many non-Armenians, have readily rallied around such a straightforward and relatively non-aggressive demand. Moreover, a Turkish confession - apparently a mere sentence or two - has seemed achievable.

Suppose, therefore, that Turkey's Prime Minister announced today that "Turkey acknowledges that 90 years ago, during a time in which both Turks and Armenians were murdered, some individuals in the Ottoman regime committed genocide against Armenians. Let us and Armenia now begin a new era."

Dead End

Would that really heal our collective psyche? Would it be sincere and signify a genuine shift in Turkish attitudes? Would Turkish organizations and individuals cease their Genocide denial? Would the remaining survivors and their descendants receive restitution/reparations?

Would Armenia's security be measurably enhanced? Would Turkey open its border with Armenia? Would it end its pan-Turkic thrust - similar to the one that spawned the Genocide - into the Caucasus and Central Asia? Could Armenians resettle in Anatolia/Western Armenia? Would Armenia recover even small amounts of that territory?

That the likely answer to each question is "No" should cause us to rethink our emphasis on acknowledgment. Among the political scientists doing that are Dr. Simon Payaslian, Nicolas Tavitian MS, and Dr. Khatchik Der Ghougassian (Armenian Forum, Vol. 2, No. 3, Gomidas.org).

Rethinking Acknowledgment

The "essential component" of "historic Armenian lands," says Payaslian, has been "redefined as, or totally replaced by, recognition." Western countries' "commemorative statements that ignore the territorial issue should be rejected." He lists four goals of acknowledgment: territory, emotional healing, restitution, and enhanced international standing for Armenia. Only the last, Payaslian concludes, is realistically achievable through acknowledgment. He is troubled by "the

lack of public debate" on the "purposes and problems" of "Genocide recognition."

So is Tavitian: "Striving for genocide recognition has long been a reflex rather than an action toward a goal ... Armenians should rethink their approach."

However, acknowledgment could be a "security guarantee" for Armenia if it can "transform Turkey the West's understanding of Armenia's security." The quest for acknowledgment, Der Ghougassian believes, maintains "vigilance against the Turkish threat." Acknowledgment might be a "first step" towards "normalization of relations." Nevertheless, "A response to the Genocide must deprive Turkey" of the land it took in the genocide. Clearly, then, we need to rethink the pursuit of acknowledgment. If not, we may regret it.

Land and Restitution

The European Union (EU), which Turkey aspires to join, is asking Turkey to recognize the Genocide. Suppose Turkey complies. The EU and the US would likely conclude, since the land and restitution issues are not now prominently on the table, that Armenians had received everything they had asked for. For Armenians to subsequently try to drag those two issues into the spotlight would be difficult. And, as argued above, acknowledgment alone is unlikely to benefit Armenia much anyway. Worse, an educated guess is that the West would accept a sham acknowledgment, such as "Turkey regrets the wrongful murder of Armenians in 1915 by the old Ottoman regime."

Frankly, acknowledgment, in the absence of the restoration of Armenian rights, may be undesirable. The pursuit of acknowledgment, rather than acknowledgment itself, helps to maintain a strong defensive posture against Turkey and is a valuable tool to keep Armenia's foe off balance.

Placing restitution and territory near the front of our agenda, therefore, serves two purposes. First, Turkey is unlikely to issue an acknowledgment at all, for fear of the consequences. Second, if an acknowledgment does come, Turkey and the West would less be able to close the book on the Armenian case. In the meantime, efforts are underway to undermine the restitution and land issues.

State Department Trap

John Evans, the US Ambassador to Armenia, and David L. Phillips, a State Department consultant and moderator of the Turkish Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC), recently toured the US gleefully claiming that Armenians cannot ask for restitution or land from Turkey.

They cite a 2003 "report" sponsored by TARC. The report affirmed the factuality of the genocide, but deviously asserted that the UN's 1948 Genocide Treaty cannot be applied retroactively to 1915 and that "legal, financial, or territorial" claims are invalid.

Indeed, Phillips hints that four years ago it was he who arranged for President Robert Kocharian to tell Turkish TV that Armenia will not press for restitution or territory. This, then, is the trap being laid for us: the US, and possibly Turkey, may someday issue a Genocide "acknowledgment", but Armenians must abandon all claims, particularly territorial ones, against Turkey.

Why is America worried about Turkish territory? Because the State Department, not to mention Europe and Israel,

regards eastern Turkey as a vital path to the Caspian Sea region's oil and gas. By disposing of Genocide acknowledgment and trashing Armenian land claims, the State Department hopes to both protect eastern Turkey and more easily penetrate the Caucasus.

The Future

Genocide acknowledgment is a vital, and perhaps permanent, weapon in Armenia and the Diaspora's arsenals. It must not be dealt away cheaply. Armenia and the traditional Diasporan political parties should immediately place land and restitution alongside, or close to, the acknowledgment demand.

Realistically, of course, Armenia cannot recover territory anytime soon. Still, that territory is vital for long-term security. For example, Armenia requires a secure path to the Black Sea and, therefore, to Europe and Russia. Needless to say, to attain that goal, Armenia must become much stronger. (See "The Armenian Land Question: Misunderstood Terrain," Armenian Mirror Spectator, Boston, July 31, 2004.)

Recovering territory and obtaining material restitution someday will heal our wounds more than all the Turkish acknowledgments in the world. Notice, for example, that as Armenians now control Karabagh and the surrounding territory, the repression and massacres that Azerbaijan inflicted on Armenians in the last 100 years take a back seat.

Winning, therefore, is the best revenge, though we will always honor those who perished and suffered in the Genocide.

Lastly, we need to better educate ourselves about land and restitution. Genocide related commemorations, lectures, and conferences should emphasize the ongoing geopolitical consequences of 1915: loss of historic lands and individual and historical property, and an adversary that remains committed to a dangerous, pan-Turkic philosophy. Younger generations, particularly - by nature action-oriented - crave such meaty political issues.

And if Turkey never acknowledges the Genocide? Security, the restoration of rights and the Armenian homeland are more important.