WHY DON'T ARMENIANS SUPPORT THE IDEA OF SETTING UP AN INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION?

Posted on December 18, 2008 by Keghart

Category: Opinions

By Tuna Baskoy, PhD, Assistant Professor Politics and Public Administration, Ryerson University, Toronto Jan. 26-27, 2008

If Armenians do not have any doubt that there is strong historical evidence that the 1915 massacre was genocide, why don't they support the idea of setting up an international commission? They don't have anything to lose but providing further strong evidence for their claim and convince ordinary citizens inside and outside Turkey.

From: Tuna Baskoy
To: Dikran Abrahamian

January 26, 2008
Dear Dikran,

Many thanks for sending me the following informative e-mail in the first place. After reading your thought-provoking e-mail, I felt compelled to attract your attention to two issues.

First, although it is correct that there are problems regarding freedom of expression in Turkey today, it is not methodologically correct to conflate internal problems with external issues and conclude tacitly that all those oppose Article 301 support the Armenian claims of the 1915 events. This is not correct. We should separate the issues clearly, if we are talking about scientific knowledge.

Secondly, if Armenians do not have any doubt that there is strong historical evidence that the 1915 massacre was genocide, why don't they support the idea of setting up an international commission? They don't have anything to lose but providing further strong evidence for their claim and convince ordinary citizens inside and outside Turkey. In this way, the dispute will come to an end quickly, instead of dragging it for many years to harm socio-economic well-being of Armenians living in Armenia. As an ordinary citizen, when I read the evidence provided by the Turkish authorities, I believe that the events cannot be characterized as 'genocide'. The way the Armenian side paints the events of 1915, I feel that I am convinced that their claim is correct. However, I don't believe either side at the end because we know that both sides are not objective. Therefore I strongly support the idea of having an independent international commission of scholars to investigate the issue and share their findings with the public around the world. As an ordinary citizen, I am ready to accept the commission's findings.

In my personal opinion, what I strongly believe is that Armenians and Turks, like Greeks and Turks, are neighbours and share the same history, same geography, and same culture. This can be seen especially when we leave our countries and live abroad, as we can see the broader picture. I have very close Armenian friends here in Toronto, like I have many Greek friends. They are closer to me, compared to some of my Turkish friends. This historical issue should not be an obstacle to friendship of the two people in particular, and all peoples living in the region in general. We should learn from Europe how to put the history behind us and look at our common economic, political, and cultural future. History in that region of the world is very painful. Instead of acting as proxies of the forces outside the region, whatever happened should be put in a broader historical perspective by the people living in the region;

lessons should be learnt, and finally a common future of peace and prosperity in the Caucasia should be dreamed by all Turks, Armenians, Georgians, and Azerbaijanis. We should take concrete initiatives to build peace and prosperity instead of deepening divisions with empty rhetoric. If there is anything I can do for peace and prosperity in the region, I am ready to take responsibility with my Armenian brothers and sisters. Please free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Tuna Baskoy, PhD
Assistant Professor
Politics and Public Administration
Ryerson University

From: Dikran Abrahamian
To: Tuna Baskoy
January 26, 2008

Dear Prof. Baskoy,

Thank you for such a prompt reply. I feel honoured.

With respect to article 301 I agree with your interpretation without any reservations. It is very true that opposing article 301 does not mean acknowledging the veracity of the Genocide. I am personally opposed to it on human rights grounds, and my solidarity with the scholars, publishers, journalists, intellectuals in Turkey is based on that.

Regarding the international commission, I humbly believe that there would be an acceptance of the proposal by a sizable number of Armenian scholars and activists both in Armenia and Diaspora provided several outstanding issues are resolved.

a) Abolition of article 301 and similar measures; under threat of prosecution it's almost impossible to conduct scholarly research within Turkey
b) Amelioration of relations between Turkey and Armenia, something which is non existent solely because of Turkey's policy of blockade which conveniently is tied with the situation of Nagorno-Karabagh (A matter that is between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but Turkey has taken upon itself in solidarity with Azerbaijan)
c) Cessation of blind ultra nationalism and allophobia in Turkey; abolition of "deep state"
d) Opening the archives related to the subject matter; several announcements by the authorities in Turkey have declared that they are freely accessible; the facts are otherwise;
e) Establishing full diplomatic relations between Turkey and Armenia; on several occasions Armenia has made its

readiness without preconditions; Turkey has yet to respond

It defies common sense, to say the least, speaking of a joint commission when there are no bare minimums of diplomatic relations.

I would hasten to state that these are my personal views and do not necessarily reflect the stance of Armenian organizations that lead the communities in the Diaspora.

Regarding the third paragraph I wholeheartedly agree with you with the following exceptions:

a) Europe was able to go ahead by acknowledging the past atrocities; official Turkey has not done so, even remotely b) You may be here by your own volition, but I, like so many others were born in foreign lands not by choice.; my father was a Genocide survivor and was fortunate to survive because my grandfather was able to escape from the massacres in Adana; my story is similar to virtually every single Armenian that I have met throughout my entire life with a handful of exceptions; so the matter that's not settled is not an issue of empty rhetoric and playing proxies; the trauma still lives with us.

I strongly believe in friendship and shake any hand that's extended irrespective of colour, race, nationality and creed. I yearn for peace; I was born in Beirut. I try to keep an open mind; otherwise I would not have joined the Workshop of Armenian and Turkish Scholars (WATS).

Respectfully yours,

Dikran

From: Tuna Baskoy
To: Dikran Abrahamian
January 27, 2008 6:21 PM

Dear Dikran,

Many thanks for your kind and thoughtful reply. I am very happy to know that we are on the same boat, i.e. supporting human dignity, and human rights regardless of geographical and political boundaries. I am a strong believer of Emmanuel Kant's idea of 'categorical imperative', i.e. we should not see human beings simply as means, but perceive them ends in themselves in the first place. This is the foundation for recognition of human dignity and respect to all human beings because we're human beings who think and communicate our ideas through speech and writing. Within this context, I am also against any limit on freedom of thought and expression, so long as it does not instigate violence. While following the events preceding the academic conference (Ottoman Armenians during the Decline of the Empire), held at Bilgi University, Istanbul on September 24-25, 2005, I felt very bad as an ordinary

citizen because academics were not free to express their opinion. In that sense, I agree with you that freedom of thought and expression is important for healthy evaluation of historical evidence.

What your conditionalities for support an international commission of historians, however, suggest is that there will be no solution to the problem in the next, at least, 20 or 30 years. Your conditionalities engender not only the total change of the Turkish state, but also Turkish people's opinion about Turkish nationalism. I personally do not think that such conditionalities will help solve the problem. As you know very well, societies and institutions do not change over night. Change is always very slow and takes many years. Moreover, your conditionalities are based on the logic of negativities in Turkey, instead of starting from positive things between the two people. When people face negative things, they always become defensive which, in turn, increases the divisions rather than bringing people closer and closer. In that sense, I understand your points, but we need to create dynamism and momentum for rapprochement with positive attitude. There should be a change in our method of dealing with the issue. We can take an initiative to change that.

I can understand your trauma and pain, but we should recall the broader picture before discussing individual experiences. In other words, the events of 1915 happened during the intense years of the First World War. As Turks were fighting against Russians, Armenians attacked Turks in northern eastern Anatolia to gain their independence by collaborating with Russians. The issue was not like that Armenians were giving red roses to Turks, whereas Turks were massacring them. Before dying, my grandfather was telling us stories about how Armenians burnt villages, and killed women and children. My point is that both sides suffered a lot in 1915 simply because it was a war. We should also think about the question of why Turks relocated Armenians from north-eastern Anatolia to Syria in the first place, if they wanted to kill them anyway. If they wanted, they could have done that without any pain of relocation. Basically, there are so many questions to be answered before coming to a healthy conclusion. That's why I am skeptic to Turkish and Armenian arguments now.

Given that we do not have any chance to roll back time to see what really happened, we may or may not find the correct answer to our questions. Even if we find the correct answers, can we change what your grandfather and my grandfather experienced? Can we bring lives back? Definitely not. But what is certain is that people who are alive today suffer from the consequences of the unfortunate past events. We must be rational, not emotional, when we decide our future. History is useful to learn lessons, not to create or further old problems. Because of this, I am applauding the Armenian government's unconditional diplomacy initiative launched several days ago. That's what we need now. In addition to such official initiatives, we, as two people, also need to form grass-root dialogue between the two people regardless of where we live. Governments do not operate in vacuum after all. The first thing we can do is to organize a cultural event together (Turkish and Armenian communities living in Canada) that emphasizes the commonalities between Turkish and Armenian cultures (food, drink, songs, dress, etc). If we work together sincerely for the same goals of bringing the two people together in the same geography and history, there is nothing we can't achieve. We need to convince each other for friendship and collaboration. However it is difficult to achieve, we should try our best because sincere efforts are always appreciated one day. What we need to do is to replace our negative attitude with positive outlook and take an action for building a bridge of friendship between the

two people regardless of where we will. As I told you before, I am ready to make my share of contribution.

Sincerely,

Tuna Baskoy, PhD