

SORRY, NO APOLOGY FROM TURKEY TO ARMENIANS

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At Least Not Yet

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Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's expression of condolence to the grandchildren of Armenians killed in the First World War by the Ottoman Empire did not go far enough – but it is a welcome gesture, and a start.

The statement is not an apology, but it is still significant. It represents the first time a Turkish prime minister has used such conciliatory language to discuss what happened in 1915. At least 21 countries have officially labelled as genocide the First World War slaughter of 1.5 million Armenians. Most Turks, however, still believe what transpired simply was an unintended consequence of a complicated war in which many suffered. In the past, those who challenged that narrative paid dearly – some with prison time and others with their lives.

Some Armenian analysts have said Mr. Erdogan's words represent an "olive branch" and an "expression of humanity." At the very least it shows a willingness to talk. It's too soon to tell whether the statement will pave the way for an apology – something Mr. Erdogan has demonstrated a capacity for in the past, when he apologized for the 1937-38 massacres against the Dersim Kurds.

If he were searching for inspiration, he could refer to an open letter published in 2008, by a group of Turkish academics and writers: "My conscience does not accept the insensitivity showed to and the denial of the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915. I reject this injustice and for my share, I empathize with the feelings and pain of my Armenian brothers. I apologize to them," they wrote.

At that time, Mr. Erdogan dismissed it: "They must have committed genocide because they are apologizing. The Turkish Republic has no such problem," he said. Today, his softened stance could prove a possible precursor to reconciliation – which would mean Turkey going much further in acknowledging what happened 99 years ago.

