THE POLITICS OF MEMORY IN ARMENIA, COLOMBIA

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Category: Opinions

By Varouj Pogharian, Bogota, Colombia, 17 May 2026

During a visit to the city of Armenia in 2019—the capital of Colombia's coffee-growing department of Quindío—I encountered something surreal: a mural of an Ottoman sultan painted on the entrance wall of the city council building.

The image felt profoundly out of place. In a city whose name inevitably evokes Armenian identity, the municipal government building displayed the likeness of an Ottoman sultan—a symbol associated, for many Armenians, with centuries of persecution culminating in the Armenian Genocide (1915 - 1923).

The mural, it turned out, was not a spontaneous artistic gesture. It emerged from a Turkish government-sponsored cultural exchange program through which Armenia's mayor and several city councilors traveled to Türkiye. Upon their return, the city commissioned a mural combining Colombian coffee imagery with an Ottoman motif.

Local reactions ranged from confusion to outrage. "What does a sultan have to do with Armenia (Colombia)?" one reader asked in a local newspaper. Another complained: "This is horrible for our city."

To be clear, the Colombian city of Armenia has no historical connection to the Armenian people. The town was founded in 1889—years before the Hamidian massacres—by settlers from the neighboring department of Antioquia, where biblical place names were commonly used for new settlements. Colombia, in fact, has numerous other places named Armenia: villages, rivers, valleys, and mountains, which reflect this naming tradition rather than any connection to Armenian history.



As I dug deeper, I learned that the city of Armenia had, during that period, been shaken by repeated corruption scandals. Several mayors faced legal investigations. The municipal officials involved in the Türkiye trip were being investigated over alleged irregularities related to travel authorization and expenses. The inquiries produced no convictions—a familiar outcome in Colombia, where corruption investigations often end without accountability.

So what exactly was behind the sultan mural?

Recognition and Retraction

The story began in 2014, when the City Council of Armenia (Colombia) passed *Agreement 08 of 2014* formally recognizing the Armenian Genocide and declaring April 24 an official day of commemoration "in solidarity with the Republic of Armenia."

It was an extraordinary gesture for a mid-sized Colombian municipality—especially considering that Colombia's national government has never officially recognized the Armenian Genocide.

The solidarity did not last. In July 2019, the city council rescinded the recognition following the all-expenses-paid visit to Türkiye by the mayor and nine council members earlier in that year. The council voted 10–4 to revoke the measure, arguing that genocide recognition belonged within the jurisdiction of national governments, not municipalities.

The sequence of events was difficult to ignore. A local expression of solidarity toward Armenians in a Colombian city coincidentally named Armenia was reversed shortly after direct Turkish engagement. The rescission was then followed by the installation of an Ottoman imagery at the entrance of the city council building.

Türkiye has long invested significant diplomatic resources into contesting international recognition of the Armenian Genocide. In Armenia, Colombia, that effort extended into symbolic geography. The mural functioned as a symbolic insertion into a place whose name carried unintended historical resonance. By placing an Ottoman imagery in a municipal government building, Turkish cultural diplomacy sought to redirect the meaning of the name itself—transforming an accidental association into a stage for Turkish presence and influence.

Mosques, Soap Operas, and Soft Power

Relations between Colombia and Türkiye deepened significantly during the 2010s, particularly after President Erdogan visited Colombia in 2015—the first visit by a Turkish head of state to the country. Embassies expanded, visa requirements were eased, trade increased, and Turkish Airlines launched direct flights to Istanbul from Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo, and Santiago. Turkish cultural influence grew rapidly across Latin America. Turkish professors began teaching in Latin American universities, student exchange programs expanded, and Turkish television soap operas became immensely popular throughout the region. These lavish melodramas, filled with



romance, betrayal, dynastic conflict, and revenge, have captivated audiences in Colombia, Mexico, Chile, Brazil, the Middle East, and beyond. Together, they are part of a broader Turkish soft-power strategy that presents Türkiye as modern, sophisticated, and globally influential.

Turkish cultural diplomacy in Latin America also carries an ideological dimension.

For years, Erdogan promoted the claim that Muslim explorers reached the Americas before Christopher Columbus, citing Columbus' description of a hill in Cuba "like a mosque." Erdogan proposed constructing an Ottoman-style mosque in Havana as a symbolic affirmation of this narrative. The Cuban government did not embrace the idea, and the project stalled. Similar discussions later surfaced in Venezuela under the government of Nicolás Maduro.

The logic behind the efforts to build a mosque resembles the symbolism of the mural in Armenia. In both cases, physical presence is used to shape the historical narrative. A mosque in the Caribbean and an Ottoman sultan in a Colombian city function as markers intended not merely to represent Turkish culture, but to overwrite or redirect historical memory.

A Petty Success

If the mural represented a success for Türkiye, it was a petty one—not a grand cultural achievement, but a symbolic intervention designed to neutralize a name Ankara still perceives as threatening.

The mural was not merely bizarre; it was political. A municipal resolution recognizing the Armenian Genocide in a distant Latin American city was enough to provoke a sustained Turkish diplomatic response. What began as an act of remembrance ended as a demonstration of how symbolic spaces can be confronted by geopolitical pressure and organized cultural diplomacy.

The episode serves as a reminder to Armenians that memory is never entirely secure. Left unattended, names, monuments, and symbols can become battlegrounds, which can be appropriated, reframed, or even inverted by those seeking to reshape historical narratives.

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Comments



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Thank you Mr Pogharian, Your thought provoking article made me realize that while as a direct result of the Genocide, many Armenians in Armenia and the Diaspora, more and more get assimilated into lesser odar cultures. The erdogans of the turkic world stay alert and dedicated to destroy the documented facts of the Genocide, while glorifying Turkish tarnished history. If it were not for your informative article, how many Armenians would have known that the once Armenian and Columbian close relationship has been hijacked by Turkish, not culture, but political strategy, to replace ancient Armenian memory in Latin America? Yet, if it is any consolation, those who read undiluted turkish history, will recognize the image of the “red sultan” as the authentic image of “the Turk”: unhindered bullying, intimidating, manipulating, bribing, occupying, and more. Colombian officials, like many others in the West, are being wined and dined also by the turkic Azeri regime to attain the unattainable to the detriment of Justice in the new world order, while Armenians “wait for Godot”.