

# TURKEY'S HUMAN RIGHTS HYPOCRISY

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By Taner Akçam, [The New York Times](#), 19 July 2012

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Turkey's desire to champion human rights in the region is a welcome development, but Mr. Erdogan's condemnation of Syria is remarkably hypocritical. As long as Turkey continues to deny crimes committed against non-Turks in the early 1900s, during the final years of the Ottoman Empire, its calls for freedom, justice and humanitarian values will ring false.



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Turkey's desire to champion human rights in the region is a welcome development, but Mr. Erdogan's condemnation of Syria is remarkably hypocritical. As long as Turkey continues to deny crimes committed against non-Turks in the early 1900s, during the final years of the Ottoman Empire, its calls for freedom, justice and humanitarian values will ring false.

Turkey's attempt to cultivate an image as the global protector of Muslim rights is compromised by a legacy of ethnic cleansing and genocide against Christians and terror against Arabs and Kurds. Memories of these crimes are very much alive throughout former Ottoman territories. And Turkey cannot serve as a democratic model until it acknowledges that brutal violence, population transfers and genocide underlie the modern Turkish state.

Using documents from the Ottoman government archives in Istanbul, which were once classified as top secret, I have sought to pull back the veil on Turkey's century of denial. These documents clearly demonstrate that Ottoman demographic policy from 1913 to 1918 was genocidal. Indeed, the phrase "crimes against humanity" was coined as a legal term and first used on May 24, 1915, in response to the genocide against Armenians and other Christian civilians.

Britain, France and Russia initially defined Ottoman atrocities as "crimes against Christianity" but later substituted "humanity" after considering the negative reaction that such a specific term could elicit from Muslims in their colonies.

Today, Mr. Erdogan is seeking to be a global spokesman for Muslim values. [In June 2011](#), he told thousands gathered to celebrate the landslide victory of his Justice and Development Party, known as the A.K.P.: "Sarajevo won today as much as Istanbul; Beirut won as much as Izmir; Damascus won as much as Ankara. Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, the West Bank, Jerusalem and Gaza won as much as Diyarbakir."

Speaking in support of oppressed Muslims has earned him popularity. But if Mr. Erdogan aspires to defend freedom and democracy in the region, he must also address the legitimate fears of Christians in the Middle East. Just as the European powers opted for universalism in 1915 by denouncing "crimes against humanity," Mr. Erdogan must move beyond his narrow focus on "crimes against Muslims." All oppressed peoples deserve protection.

It isn't a coincidence that many Christians and other minorities in Syria support Bashar al-Assad's Baath Party; they are willing to sacrifice freedom for security. While Turkish rhetoric appeals to the Sunni Muslim majority's demand for freedom in Syria, it does not relieve Syrian Christians' anxiety about their future. On the contrary, Syrian Christians listening to Mr. Erdogan and his denialist rhetoric are reminded of 1915, and that makes Turkey look very much like a security threat to them.

Confronting the past is closely linked to security, stability and democracy in the Middle East. Persistent denial of historical injustices not only impedes democratization but also hampers stable relations between different ethnic and religious groups.

This is particularly true in former Ottoman lands, where people view one another in the cloaks of their ancestors. In addition to the reverberations of the [Armenian genocide](#), mass crimes against Kurds and Alevis in Turkey, violence against Kurds and Arabs in Iraq, and Christian-Muslim tensions in Syria and Lebanon continue to poison contemporary politics.

The popularity of the A.K.P. in Turkey and the Muslim world affords Mr. Erdogan an opportunity to usher in an era of tolerance. By acknowledging the genocide against Christians and crimes against other groups, the Turks can become leaders in the realm of human rights. But Turkey's efforts to paint itself as a beacon of freedom and democracy will fail so long as Turkey refuses to atone for Ottoman sins.

Moral purists and hard-nosed realists mistakenly believe that pursuing justice and national interests are mutually exclusive. But acknowledging historical wrongs is not a zero-sum game.

In the Middle East, the past is the present. And truth and reconciliation are integral to establishing a new, stable regional order founded on respect for human rights and dignity. Turkey should lead by example.

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