TURKS' APOLOGY FOR ARMENIAN GENOCIDE: GOOD FIRST STEP, BUT NOT GOOD ENOUGH

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By Harut Sassounian, Publisher, The California Courier, 18 December 2008

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During the past week, two public appeals were issued on the Armenian Genocide -- one by Turkish intellectuals and the other by prominent individuals in Armenia.

The Turkish appeal was initiated by scholars Ahmet Insel, Baskin Oran, and Cengiz Aktar, and journalist Ali Bayramoglu. Risking death threats by Turkish extremists and possible legal action, they issued a personal apology for "the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915." On December 15, they set up an Internet site titled "We Apologize" (www.ozurdiliyoruz.com) which quickly attracted the signatures of more than 3,000 Turks.

The Turkish petition stated: "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."

This apology was not only criticized by Turkish denialists, but also by some Turks who felt the statement had not gone far enough. Aytekin Yildiz, Coordinator of the Confrontation Association, stated: "It is a good starting point, but not enough. Firstly, what do they mean by 'Great Catastrophe'? Let's name it. It is genocide. Secondly, the state has to apologize." Historian Ayse Hur said that Turkey "has to apologize on behalf of the perpetrators and for itself, because it has legitimized their actions through the years." Another prominent Turkish intellectual, who wished to remain anonymous for obvious reasons, told Zaman newspaper that the Turkish state, rather than individuals, must do the apologizing.

Turkish extremists, on the other hand, strongly condemned the signatories of the apology for "betraying" the Turkish nation. Historian Cemalettin Taskiran was quoted as stating: "This is the biggest betrayal that could be shown to our forefathers…. The campaign was set up to hurt the unity of the Turkish nation and to prepare the way for Turkey's eventual recognition of Armenian claims of genocide." Several Parliament Members representing MHP, a radical Turkish political party, accused the signatories of "insulting" Turkey. More seriously, 60 retired Turkish diplomats set up their own counter-website, describing the "apology" campaign as "unfair, wrong and unfavorable for the national interests."

The Turkish intellectuals' apology generated both positive and negative reactions on Armenian websites. Some Armenians welcomed the apology as a good first step, while others expressed concern that Turks would try to cover up their responsibility for

the Genocide by simply apologizing. Armenian critics pointed out several shortcomings in the Turkish statement: First, the apology avoided the term Armenian Genocide by referring to it as the "Great Catastrophe." Second, it alluded to the year 1915 only, rather than 1915-1923. Third, the apology was issued by individual Turks rather than the Turkish state. Even if the apology emanated from Turkish officials, it could not be viewed as a substitute for reparations and restitution.

This statement, however, serves the useful purpose of educating the Turkish public that has been kept in the dark so long about the Armenian Genocide. Rather than an Armenian-Turkish historical commission, what is needed is a purely Turkish commission that would provide a forum for Turks to discuss and discover the mass crimes of their forefathers.

By coincidence, around the time of the Turkish appeal, nearly 300 prominent individuals from Armenia issued an open letter to Pres. Abdullah Gul asking him to take the bold step of recognizing the Armenian Genocide. The Armenian appeal, like its Turkish counterpart, does not go far enough. Rather than recognition, the Armenian signatories should have sought justice for the crimes committed against the Armenian nation.

Nonetheless, the Armenian letter accomplishes several useful objectives: First, it debunks the oft-repeated Turkish lie that the genocide issue is raised only by "radical Diaspora Armenians" rather than residents of Armenia. Second, it strengthens the hand of Pres. Serzh Sargsyan in his discussions with Turkish officials to show to them how strongly Armenians feel about the Genocide. Third, even though the letter is addressed to the Turkish President, it also sends an indirect message to Pres. Sargsyan not to accept normalization of relations with Ankara, without the latter's recognition of the Armenian Genocide.

Despite their shortcomings, these two appeals may play a significant role in future decision-making by the Obama administration. It is hoped that when Turkey's lobbyists call on the White House to block U.S. acknowledgment of the Armenian Genocide, Pres. Obama would reject their request and hear the voices of thousands of Armenian and Turkish signatories who support reconciliation based on truth and justice.