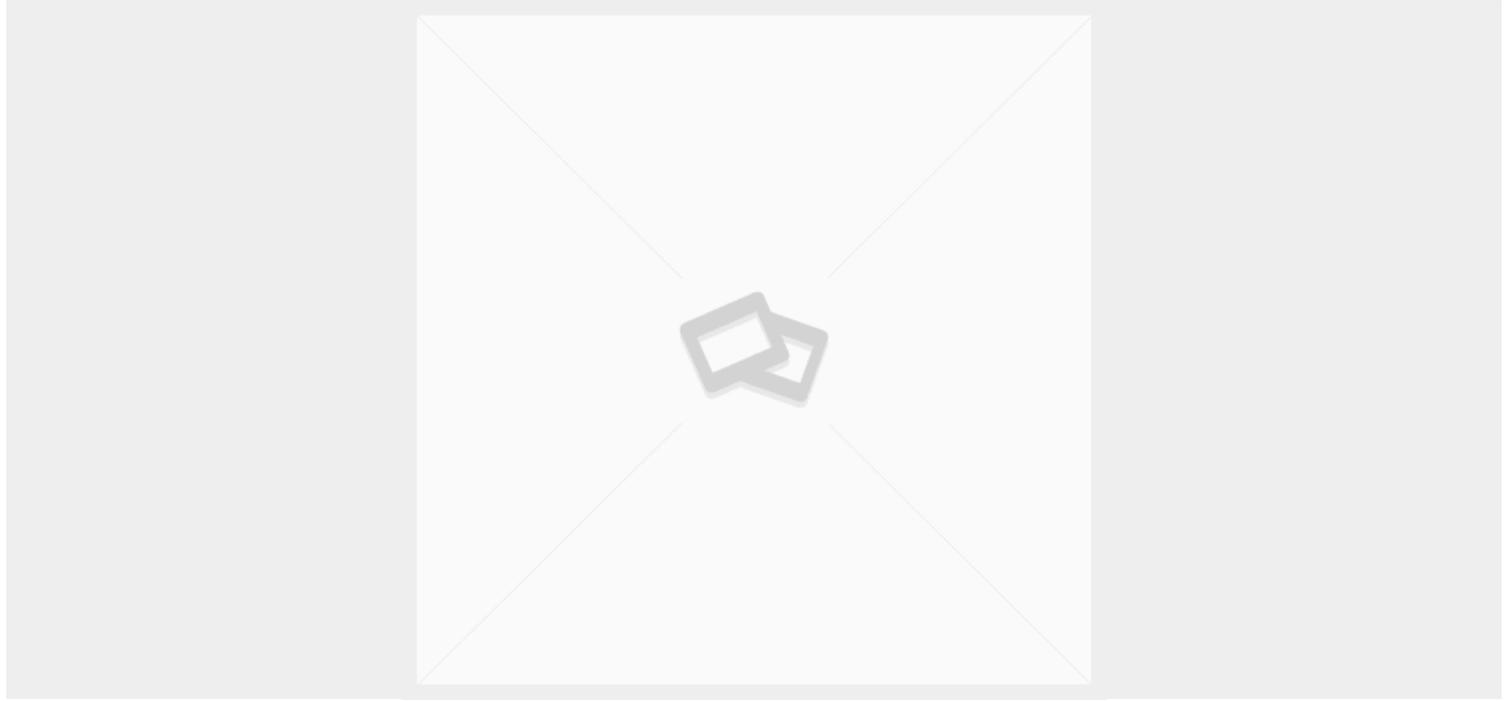


TURKS MISS GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY BY REFUSING TO GO TO YEREVAN

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By Harut Sassounian Publisher, The California Courier, 10 Jan. 2008

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However, there are several unanswered questions regarding the hearings held by Armenian Parliament, December 19-20, 2007:

- What was the objective of these hearings?
- Why were they scheduled at this particular time, just two months prior to the Armenian presidential elections?
- Why did the Armenian Parliament invite 20 Turks to these hearings?
- What were the criteria for the selection of these invitees?
- Did the parliamentary commission really expect these Turks to come to Yerevan, or by anticipating their refusal to participate the Armenian side intended to prove to the world that Turks had no interest in having a dialogue with Armenians?
- Why were no Armenian experts from the Diaspora invited to testify?

According to press reports, among the invitees were Turkish professors Fatma Muge Gocek, Taner Akcam, Halil Berktaç and Baskin Oran, Nobel Prize-winning novelist Orhan Pamuk, notorious genocide denialists Yusuf Halacoglu (Turkish Historical Society President), Sedat Laciner (International Strategic Research Institute Director), and Former Turkish Ambassador Omer Engin Lutem (head of the Armenian Studies Institute of the Eurasian Strategic Research Center), Turkey’s Foreign Minister Ali Babacan, Dr. Can Paker (Turkey’s special representative for relations with the European Union), and Armenian Patriarch Mesrob Mutafian.

In an article written after the hearings, Amb. Lutem gave two reasons why none of the Turkish invitees attended. He said the hearings coincided with a Muslim religious holiday and the invitations had arrived too late. He did, however, state that “such hearings are essentially useful as they are conducive to aiding the parties involved gauge each other’s viewpoints. For this reason, I would have liked to have been able to take part in the said discussions.”

From the Armenian perspective, it is particularly fortunate that denialists Halacoglu, Laciner and Lutem, as well as Foreign Minister Babacan, did not attend. Otherwise, they would have created a major scandal by disseminating falsehoods about the Armenian Genocide right from the podium of the Armenian Parliament in the heart of Yerevan. In my view, the Turkish side missed a golden opportunity by failing to capitalize on the Armenian invitation. Turkish denialists would have not only used this occasion to spread lies on the Armenian Genocide, but also give the false impression to the outside world that Armenia and Turkey are in dialogue with each other and enjoy friendly relations. Would the Turkish government reciprocate by inviting Armenian scholars and officials to tell the true story of the Armenian Genocide from the podium of the Turkish Parliament in Ankara? Former Amb. Lutem made such a suggestion: "The importance of such hearings rests in generating greater understanding concerning the views and standpoints of the parties concerned. Looked at from this perspective, it would be worthwhile if the Turkish Grand National Assembly's concerned commissions were to organize a similar meeting in the coming months."

Should Ankara follow Amb. Lutem's clever advice and invite Armenian scholars and officials to take part in hearings at the Turkish Parliament in Ankara, Armenians would look bad if they refuse to participate.

However, now that the Turkish side did not go to Yerevan, Armenians have the perfect excuse for reciprocating in kind. No one would blame the Armenians for turning down such an invitation from Ankara. In fact, the Speaker of the Armenian Parliament, Tigran Torosian, during the hearings, chided the Turks for not showing up. He voiced his concern that Turkey's decision not to participate in the discussions would not contribute to dialogue between the two nations.

Furthermore, the Armenian side, in rejecting such a Turkish invitation, could cite the infamous article 301 ("Insulting Turkishness") as its key reason for not participating in the hearings in Turkey. How could Armenians go to Ankara and make statements on the Armenian Genocide, if doing so would cause their incarceration? No Armenian, official or otherwise, should set foot on Turkish soil, until article 301 is completely eliminated, not just amended!

