WE'RE NO LONGER IMPRESSED: WE'VE CHANGED

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Taner Akçam, The Armenian Weekly, 7 May 2014

"The poor speak at length of the rich man's possessions, but it benefits them not." (*Zenginin malı fukaranın çenesini yorarmış*). So goes the Turkish expression, and thus it is with the Turkish Prime Minister's recent comments on the events of 1915. No doubt, they will be discussed and debated at length, because no Turkish Prime Minister before Mr. Erdoğan has ever given such a speech. But are his words really that earthshaking?

I'm not at all enthused about the prospect of weighing in on the matter at this point. Clearly, there are many things that could be said! I am reminded of the half full/half empty debate. Some will now see the glass of "1915 debate" as half full and the prime minister's words as an historic event—possibly even a "turning point," since, before his speech, it was nearly empty. Such positive declarations will most likely emerge from circles close (or closer) to the AKP government, those who have not been on the receiving end of its harsh and repressive policies. Even Turkey's more liberal sectors are sure to respond in a cautiously optimistic "wait-and-see" manner to Erdoğan's utterances.

On the other hand, there will be those who will look at the still empty portion of the glass with a time-honored cynicism. In these quarters the speech is sure to be met with wry assessments such as: "Just another of Tayyip's games," and "Talk is cheap; actions speak louder than words." These will be followed by suspicions: "Why now ?" and "What's the *real* reason for such pronouncements?" These statements will no doubt come from the opponents of Erdoğan and his party: from the malcontents and the scoffers!

And then there will be some middle-of-the-roaders who will approve of the prime minister's statements but find them insufficient…. For them the glass is both half full *and* half empty. Feeling perhaps burned by the government's failed "gestures" toward the country's Alevi and Kurdish minorities, these people are now inclined to dismiss the statement as a vain or hopeless attempt at some sort of reconciliation.

Do I lean toward this approach? Not at all! In fact, I am more inclined to view this whole debate (as outlined above) as distressingly boring and unproductive.

I'm looking to go deeper, to find an understanding that goes beyond this glass half-empty/half-full debate.

Is that possible? I believe that it just might be…

But first of all, I would like to add a small historical note to those who are characterizing Erdoğan's speech as offering "totally new" and "historic" utterances: it doesn't. And outside of the prime minister's speech there is nothing really new being said here. These ideas and opinions have all—*all*—been expressed dozens of times and in many different venues and manners, most notably

by former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, and usually as part of a call to preserve a "just and equitable memory," (*adil hafıza*) a protective rubric used in an effort to equate the horrors of the Armenian deportations with Turkish losses at Gallipoli and Sarıkamış.

Don't get me wrong: it is truly significant that the Turkish prime minister would repeat these things in his "official" capacity, but let's keep things in perspective: "historic" is a bit strong.

Even so, I would wrong not to acknowledge that there are a number of very powerful ideas contained within Mr. Erdoğan's speech: first and foremost, his calls that "differing statements should be met with empathy and tolerance" and for "working to listen to and understand the other." In effect, these statements are important for giving an 'official' sanction for free discussion of the events of 1915. Nevertheless, such a statement comes across as more than a bit peculiar, calling as it does for people to embrace what should in any case be a given in the 21st century.

Another important aspect of Erdoğan's statements was his call for the "understanding and sharing of sorrows" and to avoid attempts "either to establish a hierarchy of suffering or to create a comparison between or competing of suffering." Even so, I can't help but offer a bitter chuckle… When I first returned to Turkey for the first time in 1993 I remember being terrified when I found myself everywhere met with hateful stares—even by those on the Left—for having said such things. I admit, it's a strange feeling some 21 years later to now hear these same things emerging from the mouth of the prime minister! Like them or not, they show that we made at least some progress over the past two decades.

The third important idea in Erdoğan's speech was his expressing the hope that "those Armenians who lost their lives during the conditions at the beginning of the 20th century should rest in peace; we wish to offer our condolences to their descendants (*torunlar*)." It's true that he made no mention of the year 1915, nor used the word 'massacre' (*katliam*) or others that might describe the events of that time, but this sentence is nevertheless the most important one in his entire speech. It expresses a human dimension heretofore missing from such utterances. In this sense, at least, it *does* represent an undeniable novelty. Even so, it is less important for me to comment on this expression of condolence than to hear how it is received by those whose family members were annihilated during these events.

In the prime minister's speech I did however notice one lie that was overlooked in the general confusion. "We have opened our archives for use to all researchers," he claimed. That's a bald-faced lie.

One of the most important archives for the Armenian genocide is that of the Turkish Chiefs of Staff. This archive has neither been properly catalogued, nor has it ever been open to researchers. And there's nothing encouraging about the fact that such blatant untruths could still be included in such a speech.

Our Opinions have been elevated from 'Treason' to 'Opinion'

Even leaving aside columnist Fehmi Koru's strange claim that "an apology for history has already been given," what meaning should we derive from the prime minister's speech? The Justice and Development Party (known in Turkey by the acronym AKP), which, since coming to power in 2002 has been making some significant changes in the traditional policies of the Turkish Republic, has also shifted the parameters of debate on the question of the Armenian genocide; this is the fact.

With this speech, those in Turkey calling for an open discussion of the events of 1915 will no longer be subjected to attacks and accused of being "traitors who have stabbed the nation from the back" (as did the then-Interior Minister/current Speaker of the Assembly) or "dirty Armenians." Nor will the memory of the events be insulted or disparaged by terming them "alleged" or "so-called." We can state with confidence that the era of Yusuf Halaçoğlu, Şükrü Elekdağ and Gündüz Aktan has now officially come to an end.

In fact, the 'reign' of these persons had already begun to crumble after the murder of Hrant Dink, although it is significant that it still retains a certain 'official' status.

For me, the meaning of Erdoğan's pronouncements is this: the Turkish government will now tolerate opinions that run counter to the "official version" of events, although that does not mean that it will entertain them. It's official stance remains unchanged and fully defended. With the notion that "we should understand everybody's sufferings and share the sorrow" the government is simply attempting to bury the Turkish war casualties in the same mass grave as the Armenian victims of the deportations. And that has already been said for years now.

If you are inclined to see the government's different language on the issue as a momentous change, I won't argue with you; I would simply state that I do not see anything new in the *substance* of government's approach to the events of 1915.

In the final analysis, what is necessary now is not more fine talk, but for the government to take the necessary steps, and only time will tell.

For me, the real question is not merely what the prime minister says, but *who* pushes him to say these things and *what* they push him to say. As we approach the year 2015, the 100th anniversary of the events in question, the Turkish government is certain to feel pressure from various quarters within the international community and to wish to extract itself from the tight spot in which it finds itself. The American Jewish Committee, which until recently was one of Turkey's important defender in Washington, has now officially used the term "genocide" to refer to the Armenian massacres and has called on Turkey to do the same.

Consider for a moment what will happen if the Prime Minister, who has managed during his tenure to lose a great deal of international support, continues in such conditions of greater diplomatic isolation to repeat his other, oft-repeated statements to the effect that "Muslims don't perpetrate genocides" and that "No one can claim that my ancestors committed genocide"…

Erdoğan was forced to change his attitude. If he continued along his old-known path, he was facing the prospect of missing this fast-approaching train. His new stance does not reflect the dynamic of any process; rather, it merely indicates that he correctly perceived the ground below his feet to be shifting and adjusted his stance accordingly. As it enters 2015, the Turkish regime cannot be said to be changing so much as simply performing 'damage control.'

In any case, I do not believe that this "miraculous change" originated from the Office of the Prime Minister. It is we who brought it about. It is those thousands of persons who took to the streets in protest after Hrant Dink's death… Other pressures were also brought to bear from abroad… The resistance efforts of those within Turkey have gradually begun to merge with those of the Armenian diaspora. Such a unity of effort will most likely not change the prime minister's views…but it has certainly changed his speech.

And We, Too, Have Changed…

There is one thing that those preparing the prime minister's speeches have yet to understand, and that is that we, the people, who have struggled against a century of mendacity regarding the Armenian genocide, have changed. And we have changed greatly.

If the Turkish prime minister had uttered these same words some 10 years earlier, we might indeed have viewed them as historical, even revolutionary. But a whole lot of water has passed under the bridge since then. Our skin has grown thicker, our beating hearts have gradually been filled with more pain, more bitterness, and we have chosen to learn from our accumulated experience. What a decade before might have been seen as a great transformation today barely stirs us. Indeed, we cannot but greet these statements with a bitter smirk, an empty laugh; even as we welcome it, it leaves a bitter taste in our mouths.

After this point, anyone who wishes to speak of the genocide of 1915—the prime minister included, if they truly desire us to find their utterances meaningful and to be inspired by their words, they will have to first understand that the bar has been set higher—much higher—than in previous years. Those who greet this speech with the approach of "those matters pertaining to history have been resolved. Let's move on" would do well to know this. I and persons like myself will no longer be satisfied with mere talk. Serious, deliberate, concrete steps are what is now expected. And many eyes will be closely following events to see whether or not these steps are taken.

1. There has been a conscious 'politics of denial' in this country for more than 90 years, and it has continued into the AKP period (2002-present). If those from the ruling elite—people like Erdoğan himself—truly wish to alter Turkey's long-held 'politics of denial,' they must start by acknowledging their own role in its creation and continuation, to apologize for it and then to correct it. Anything less will simply not be convincing at this point.
2. There is no longer a place for those who would deny the crimes of 1915, or who would attempt to spread the blame with claims that "everyone suffered" and with calls to "understand

everyone's pain." Nothing will be resolved without first recognizing the difference between war casualties and victims of crimes such as genocide. We must call a crime a crime. It is not possible to lower the bar or dance around the issue any longer. Without first acknowledging that what happened to Armenians in 1915 was a crime, any efforts attempted will be non-starters.

3. The most meaningful and significant beginning step to be taken is for Turkey to open its borders with Armenia and to establish diplomatic relations. We are well aware that we are speaking about a government that, only two years before, sent its Interior Minister to an Istanbul rally protesting the Hocalı massacre (it is claimed committed by Armenian army against Azerbaijanis in 1992) and hanged signs throughout Istanbul reading "Don't believe the Armenian lies!"

And I won't even mention the discovery and exposure of Hrant Dink's real assailants…

No, I do not believe that the dynamic and impetus for change on the events of 1915 lies in the hands of the government. They know full well that "the train is leaving the station," but they hope to delay for as long as possible before hopping on the very last car. But as we rapidly approach the hundredth anniversary of the Armenian genocide they will have no other choice than to acknowledge the historical crime that has been committed, to Express their apologies for this crime and to begin to engage in serious discussions with both the Armenian Republic and the Armenian diaspora in order to attempt to atone for the damage that has been done. Any initiative in this direction is welcome, but only for the sake of opening the way to discussion, not ending it. This must be perceived and understood. Haven't we already waited long enough for this to be done? We have, but will continue to wait; we're not going anywhere.

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