WHAT THE TURKS CAN DO FOR 2015

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By Raffi Bedrosyan, Toronto, 26 January 2014

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Meaningful dialogue between two conflicting parties can only happen if both parties are aware of the facts and the truth. Even though the Turkish state has not allowed the truth and the facts of 1915 to come out until recently, there are now clear signs that the taboos about 1915 are finally broken and that there is a 'common body of knowledge' emerging among the Turkish opinion makers and ordinary citizens. For four generations, the Turkish citizens were brainwashed about 1915 by the state education system and the media. However, Turkish people can no longer be defined as a homogenous, uniform group. Clashes between the Turkish state and the sizable Kurdish/Alevi population, as well as the prosecution and punishment of the 'deep state' leaders who ruled Turkey until a few years ago, have become recent factors in questioning the state version of history regarding the 1915 events. A few bright personalities in politics, academia, media and literature, i.e. opinion makers, have advocated increased democratization, freedom of speech and minority rights; moreover, they have acknowledged the truth about 1915 and demanded that the state also do so. There is now a small but fast increasing segment of the population which wants the state to face the past about the 1915 events.

To date, there have been few attempts of dialogue between the Armenian world and this liberalized segment of the Turkish population and opinion makers. Apart from the activities of the Hrant Dink Foundation based in Istanbul, the only contacts by Armenians have been through a few individuals in academia, film, media, music and culture, and organizationally by the Zoryan Institute in the academic field, by the Armenian NGO Civilitas through its recently opened office in Istanbul, and some political exchanges between Kurdish political parties and representatives of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. Armenian academia, NGOs and opinion makers should aim at direct contact with their Turkish counterparts in conveying the truth in Turkish, through jointly organized conferences, seminars, TV programs, films and translated publications. For example, ordinary Turks should find out about the courageous Turkish government officials who resisted the inhumane government decisions to annihilate the Armenian population in 1915. They should learn about the fate of the properties left behind by the annihilated Armenians, including hundreds of thousands of houses, fields, shops, warehouses, factories, mines, churches and schools, all confiscated by the state, *Ittihat ve Terakki* leaders or local Moslem notables. They should understand that most of the Ataturk House Museums scattered all over Anatolia belonged to deported or murdered Armenian citizens of the Ottoman state. They should be reminded that the very residence where the Turkish President sits today in Ankara, was once owned by an Armenian family.

Of course, the Turkish state will continue using all its resources to prevent its citizens from finding out the truth. Notwithstanding the boasts of the Turkish prime minister Erdogan that their archives are open and they have nothing to hide, the reality is that their archives are not entirely open and have gone through two major "clean-ups". The first "clean-up" and destruction of files was in 1918, when the Ittihat Terakki leaders escaped from Istanbul in a German warship to avoid prosecution as war criminals, carrying several trunkloads of documents with them. At the same time, the main planner of the Armenian deportations and massacres, Special Organization Chief Bahattin Shakir also burned rooms-full of documents related to their activities. The second purging took place in the 1990s when the Ottoman Archives were reorganized, translated into modern Turkish and digitized. A team of diplomats, historians, retired ambassadors and military officers sifted through millions of documents with the objective of eliminating any incriminating reference to the Armenians. Recent Wikileaks documents indicate that the Ottoman archival documents, initially estimated at 50 million records, turned out to be more like 200 million and therefore, the intended purge could not be carried out effectively. Obviously, several thousand documents escaped scrutiny and a few prominent Turkish scholars like Taner Akcam, Umit Kurt and Ugur Ungor have been able to produce significant historic facts about the intended annihilation of the Armenians and confiscation of their properties, based only on the Ottoman archives.

It was recently revealed that all researchers delving into the Armenian issue in the Ottoman archives were being tracked and monitored. If their work was deemed to be against the state version, there would be harassment and funding repercussions against them and the institutions where they worked/studied. Meanwhile, researchers who produce/falsify/create documents minimizing

Armenian losses are encouraged and rewarded. In 2005, Murat Bardakci, an investigative journalist, published Talat Pasha's diary revealing that Talat had kept detailed records of the numbers and destination of the deported Armenians, had tallied the loss of Armenians at 972,000, but had also stated that the total missing could exceed 1.2 million due to unaccounted relocations.

During a recent TV talk show about history, "Rear Window of History", Bardakci had invited a history professor from Sakarya University, a state sponsored 'expert' on the Armenian issue, where this expert announced that the archives show the Ottoman government took all precautions to care for the 300,000 Armenians temporarily deported 'only' from the eastern war front, that 'only' a few thousand died from illness, but most of them safely returned home after the war. Bardakci then confronted him by producing Talat Pasha's diary and the numbers that Talat himself had quoted; the expert said he can only work with whatever is available in the state archives. He also announced that Turkish historians have now 'proven' that all the genocide allegations are 'fiction', based on American Ambassador Morgenthau's book, which was specifically produced as a propaganda tool to drum up support for the United States to enter the war. Even Bardakci found this expert's comments embarrassing for Turkey, which would result in more ridicule internationally and weaken Turkey's hand further in the eve of 2015.

If Prime Minister Erdogan really wants to prove that Turkey has nothing to hide on the Armenian issue, all he has to do is order the release of two sets of critical documents - the deportation books and the deeds. First set of documents is the 33 dossiers of the Deportation and Liquidation Commissions formed in 1915-16 in various Ottoman Anatolian provinces, recording, listing, appraising, and holding on deposit the assets of the deported Armenians for their eventual return, but also selling or distributing some of the Armenian assets to Moslem refugees. The whereabouts of these dossiers is a mystery but speculated that they are still intact and kept in the prime ministry offices. The second set of documents is the Ottoman land registry and property deeds records. In 2005, when the government attempted to comply with European Union (EU) modernization initiatives by translating and opening these records to the public, it was prevented from doing so by a stern warning (dated Aug. 26, 2005) from the National Security Committee of the Turkish Armed Forces, which stated that "The Ottoman records kept at the Land Register and Cadaster Surveys General Directorate offices must be sealed and not available to the public, as they have the potential to be exploited by alleged genocide claims and property claims against the State Charitable Foundation assets. Opening them to general public use is against state interests".

Recently, it came to light that a former prime minister had come close to taking a positive step toward the Armenian issue. Being a pragmatic politician, in the early 1990s Turgut Ozal had wished the issue to be resolved by ending the Turkish denialist policy, and he had commissioned a study to quantify the amount of compensation needed to be paid to the Armenians worldwide. It is reported that the study did come up with a monetary figure but no further steps were taken, either because the cost would be exorbitant, or because Ozal suddenly and mysteriously died in 1993. His sudden

death is still subject of speculation after 20 years. His body was recently exhumed and examined for presence of poisons. It is said that he was severely criticized by the military and the deep state, not only for this Armenian episode, but more critically, for his desire to end the separatist Kurdish issue by giving concessions to them.

Based on feedback and comments on my articles, there seems to be a significantly wide readership in Turkey and within their government circles. A recurring theme I hear is that the present government, unlike the previous ones, has taken a lot of positive steps toward the Armenians, and yet, there is no acknowledgement or reciprocating goodwill from the Armenian side. The positive examples cited include the restoration of Akhtamar Holy Cross Church (still known as Akdamar Museum in Turkey), the return of several confiscated properties belonging to the Armenian Church and charitable foundations (returns still less than 10% of properties seized after the 1930s, none from before 1915 and none of the private properties), increased freedom of speech with utterance of the term 'Armenian Genocide' no longer a punishable offense (but still people like Hrant Dink can get killed for uttering it and still the real murderers can remain hidden), and so on. I do acknowledge that these are positive steps, but only a few steps toward a mile long journey. Perhaps the mile long journey cannot be completed by 2015, but several concrete and specific steps need to be taken by Turkey to achieve some credibility and respectability. Instead of diversionary tactical steps like Foreign Minister Davutoglu's recent visit to Armenia, which achieved nothing, I will humbly offer a few suggestions for the consideration of my Turkish government acquaintances:

1. Open the border with Armenia without any preconditions, re-name the Alican border crossing as the Hrant Dink Gate, honoring the heroic advocate of dialogue between the two peoples;

2. Grant citizenship to all living descendants of the deported Ottoman citizen Armenians;

3. Clean up the textbooks at all levels of the educational system by eliminating the falsifications, hate-mongering and discrimination toward Armenians (and other minorities);

4. Initiate a state program by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism to restore the more than 2,000 destroyed or deteriorating Armenian monasteries and churches, and return them to the rightful owner, the Armenian Church (Istanbul Armenian Patriarchate);

5. Offer a symbolic but meaningful apology to the Armenian people for all the crimes of 1915, by returning Mount Ararat and Ani to Armenia, perhaps as part of a territorial exchange based on equivalent land area;

6. Open to the public the afore-mentioned documents related to the deportation/liquidation records and the Ottoman property deeds related to the deported Armenians;

7. Allow personal compensation cases by the descendants of the Ottoman citizen Armenians related to their confiscated properties to proceed in Turkish and international courts;

8. Offer free transit and duty free port facilities for Armenia at a Black Sea city such as Trabzon and

Rize, as partial compensation toward economic losses of the Ottoman citizen Armenians.

Turkish acquaintances in government circles complain that the Armenians' insistence in using the word Genocide is a barrier to any progress toward dialogue about 1915. None of the suggestions above refer to that word, and all of them are do-able by 2015, if there really is goodwill. Once there is knowledge of the facts followed by dialogue about the truth of 1915 among the Turkish opinion makers and ordinary citizens, the far-reaching result would be the creation of voters aware of the truth. Knowledgeable voters would then vote in knowledgeable parliament members and eventually governments, which would set policies and decisions according to the voters' preferences. I would suggest that decisions taken in the Turkish Parliament respecting the truth of 1915 would be far more effective than any decision taken in the parliaments of third party states.