WINNING TURKISH HEARTS AND MINDS

Posted on July 18, 2010 by Keghart

Keghart.com

Category: Opinions

Keghart.com Team Editorial, 21 July 2010

The anguish of the survivors of the Genocide of Armenians and that of their descendants are many, obvious and well publicized. Among the long list of Armenian wounds is Turkey's denial of its mass crime. Official Turkey's refusal drives Armenians to the wall.

Keghart.com Team Editorial, 21 July 2010

The anguish of the survivors of the Genocide of Armenians and that of their descendants are many, obvious and well publicized. Among the long list of Armenian wounds is Turkey's denial of its mass crime. Official Turkey's refusal drives Armenians to the wall.

In a 1991 interview with David Barsamian, the late champion of the Palestinian cause Edward Said said, "Because what has killed us in the last 30 or 40 years is the denial of the fact that they are not responsible ." Nearly two decades ago, Prof. Said pointed out, "So we appear as if we are orphans, as if we have no origins, no narrative, no genealogy as a people. Our genealogy is only comprehensible, in my opinion, if Israeli action in it directly upon us is acknowledged… the denial and the silence… has been very, very bad for us."
Unlike Palestinians, Armenians do have an acknowledged history, solid national narrative, and genealogy going back 4,300 years. Nevertheless, the silence Said talked about has also been very, very bad for us. Turkey's silence has added fuel to Armenian frustration; it near-monopolized Diaspora Armenian political activities; and in the '80s helped impel some Armenian young men to terrorist acts.

Said's observations about Israel and Palestinians are seconded by Ece Temelkuran, a Turkish author and journalist, when she talks about Armenian/Turkish relations. During a recent interview with Talin Babayan, the author of "Deep Mountain: Across the Turkish-Armenian Divide"—said of Armenians she had interviewed in Armenia, Russia, France, and the US, "Although they expressed it in completely different ways, the main question that was eating them was this: 'Why don't Turks feel anything?'"

The Turkish commentator continued, "…But the one he wants to tell his story to doesn't want to listen…I think although the Armenian community is extremely mature, they have this wounded child in them whatever their ages are."

Temelkuran criticized Genocide-acknowledging Turkish intellectuals "who are trying to push and slap this issue into people's faces. They expect people to feel guilty, rather than remember." Temelkuran says that she took a different and successful tack in her book. She focused on making Turks remember and then "leave it to them to figure out what they feel about it."

"Deep Mountain" has so far sold 70,000 copies in Turkey—a runaway bestseller in that country. Its English version, with a cover depicting Ararat and Yerevan, is available in North American

bookstores. Talking about her Turkish readers, Temelkuran says most of them felt something, not necessarily guilty, but touched for the first time. “They were eager to understand the human side of the history,” said Temelkuran. “They admitted that they have feelings about Armenians which Turks are taught not to have, I guess for the first time.”

Perhaps Temelkuran is on to something.

Perhaps we should re-set our Genocide-recognition efforts.

Perhaps we should by-pass official Turkey and try to reach ordinary Turks.

Rather than focusing only on international resolutions and condemnation, we should try to touch Turkish hearts, before reaching for their minds.

So far our efforts to reach Turkish citizens have been unsuccessful because they live in Fortress Turkey. The Big Lie Denial Machine of Ankara has effectively shut out the truth from its citizens. Denial has become rooted in Turkish society because of blanket propaganda by Ankara and the Turkish establishment.

So how do we reach the ordinary Turkish citizen?

Here are some ideas:

Since we can’t send printed material to Turkey, why not establish a Turkish language TV station in Armenia? The station would telecast news and analysis (mostly about Armenian/Turkish affairs), music, soap operas, and talk about the past millennia of Armenian/Turkish history. Turkish experts would be interviewed or invited to present their take on current affairs, our mutual history and cultural relations. This type of environment would allow us to talk about the Genocide, our four-millennia plus presence in Anatolia, and our empire-building contributions to Turkey.

Another idea to reach Turkish civilians is to establish several websites, which would look at issues of common interest. These websites would offer Turks and Armenians to exchange ideas and engage in civil debate, without resorting to insults and offensive language. "The Workshop of Armenian and Turkish scholars" (WATS) may serve as a model to expand communication beyond the scholarly community. "Friends of Hrant Dink" is another example of forums where mutual concerns are discussed in a civil manner.

Another approach would be to organize Armenian/Turkish cultural events--in Turkey, in Armenia, and in the Diaspora. Joint film festivals, musical events, art exhibitions, book fairs, performance arts would be part of this approach. These projects could provide a "soft" stage for Armenians and Turks to exchange views and compare attitudes.

Maybe it is premature or far-fetched to ask, but why don't Armenian organizations in the Diaspora set shop in Turkey, registering as NGOs within the laws permitting such initiatives? Of course, there are dangers associated with such an endeavour, but who said things would be easy?

Perhaps in this manner we can penetrate Fortress Turkey and reach the hearts—and then the minds—of the average Turk.