

TURKEY'S IMAGE AND THE ARMENIAN QUESTION

Turkey can justifiably condemn the policies and actions of previous regimes or governments while still asserting pride in its history, the author argues. He subsequently points out that confronting its own history with honesty will only strengthen Turkey domestically and internationally. Among other suggestions, the author calls for Turkey to suspend all its paid lobbying activities with respect to congressional resolutions about 1915 and instead dedicate resources to examine the events of 1915 authoritatively, independently, and openly.

Osman Bengür*



* Osman Bengür, a Turkish-American former candidate for the U.S. Congress, is a businessman/investment banker based in Washington DC and a columnist for www.citybizlist.com

President Obama's recent visit to Turkey underscores the growing importance that the United States places on Turkish cooperation as it seeks to address a profound set of problems in the region such as withdrawal from Iraq without enabling a new round of sectarian violence, support of Afghanistan and Pakistan in the fight against Al Qaeda and the Taliban, and the containment of Iran's growing nuclear ambitions. For these and other reasons, the relationship between Turkey and the U.S. has never been more important.

Turkey's strategic value to the U.S. is undeniable. Turkey's geographic position, its young population and, until the recent global slowdown, its dynamic economy make it well positioned to become an increasingly influential player in political, economic and security affairs in Europe and the Middle East political affairs.

Yet as the U.S. focuses increasing attention on its relations with Turkey, the long shadow cast by the "Armenian question" could foil both countries' desire to work more closely together and hinder Turkey's larger ambitions.

The efforts of the Armenian diaspora and support from key politicians in the U.S. and Europe will ensure that the issue will not go away anytime soon. The lack of closure has put Turkey on the defensive and continues to damage Turkey's image in the world and serves as a metaphor for those who still harbor prejudices against Turkey. More importantly, it casts a poor light on the positive progress being made in today's Turkey and puts Turkey's real friends in a difficult position. And, for those with a narrow agenda, it negatively impacts Turkey's importance as a partner and ally of the U.S. and its ability to address other shared issues of concern including the fight against terrorism, transportation of energy from the Caspian, the preservation of Iraq's territorial integrity, and the containment of Iran's nuclear ambitions.

To date, Turkey has been mostly successful in its efforts to fight genocide resolutions. So, why should Turkey care about finding a satisfactory solution to the "Armenian question"?

During President Obama's recent visit to Turkey, his measured speech to the Turkish Parliament underscored the importance of the Armenian question as he carefully addressed the issue of the massacres of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey in 1915 by noting that he had not changed his views and urging Turkey to confront her past.

While Turkish government officials and parliamentarians certainly were aware that as a candidate, President Obama expressed the belief that what happened in 1915 was genocide, they may have anticipated that the President, like his predecessors -who pulled their punches when confronted with threats from Turkey that any acknowledgment of a “genocide” would cause serious (although unspecified) damage to relations- would have found a way to skirt the question of genocide during their presidency. So they must have been surprised that Obama raised the issue, however diplomatically he did so.

The President’s visit to Turkey and his subsequent non-mention of the “G” word when he addressed the Armenian community in his “Remembrance Day” message could be interpreted as justifying Turkey’s long standing strategy to fight genocide resolutions with threats that such resolutions will damage relations with the U.S. But Turks should not be so confident. If President Obama pulled his punches in his Ankara address in order to show respect for and his desire to cooperate with Turkey, he may not in the future. In fact, the new U.S. President has shown in other situations, most recently in pressing Israel on a Palestinian solution, that he is not afraid to take on controversial issues and challenge the U.S.’s longstanding friends.

Another example that the Armenian question is not going to go away is that yet another resolution has been introduced in the U.S. Congress to recognize the “Armenian Genocide.” Because of the enormity of other issues confronting Congress at this time and the desire not to add to Obama administration’s foreign policy headaches, it does not appear likely that the resolution will get much traction even from sympathetic members of Congress. The dual challenges of a global economic recession and foreign policy challenges in the Middle East buttresses the argument that the timing for such a resolution could not be worse.

It is a wasteful diversion for the U.S. Congress to occupy itself with resolutions of this nature when there are other issues of more importance. Nevertheless, both Armenian and Turkish lobbyists will wage yet another battle to press their respective positions.

By some accounts, approximately 70 percent of the Turkish Embassy’s time in Washington is spent trying to persuade leading Americans to support the Turkish position on the Armenian question. This is an enormous amount of time to spend on one issue and, by necessity, relegates other issues of more immediate importance into the background.

So far those lobbying efforts have been successful, but sooner or later, a time may come when the word “genocide” will be used officially regardless of how the Turks feel.

Many friends of Turkey, including members of the U.S. Congress, are frustrated with Turkey’s intransigence on the Armenian issue which they view as self-defeating for Turkey’s aspirations. And Turks need to confront the reality that their success in defeating genocide resolutions is not necessarily because of the historical validity of their argument. The uncomfortable truth is that while “friends of Turkey” may have sympathy for Turkey and its arguments that the events of 1915 were not genocide and that Muslims suffered too, they believe that Turkey should acknowledge that it was a terrible policy, not unlike the ethnic cleansing that Muslims suffered recently in Bosnia, and express more empathy for the fact that hundreds of thousands of Armenians died as a result of the Ottoman government policy to deport Armenians.

One solution to the question of whether the events should be characterized as genocide may come from Prime Minister Erdoğan’s proposal to establish a commission to examine the historical record. Such a commission’s findings may prove conclusive if evidence is discovered in Turkish and Armenian archives to support one position or the other.

It is not unusual that history is often rewritten as new facts and different perspectives are considered. New historical information is constantly being discovered that changes perceptions about events that were once seen to be settled conclusively. As new archival information is examined, Turkey may well find justification for its position that the massacres were a tragic consequence of war and not a deliberate policy.

But it is also possible that no amount of historical research will be conclusive or satisfy either the Armenian or Turkish position.

Regardless of whether the massacres can be characterized as genocide, it is ironic that the modern Republic of Turkey, founded by Atatürk, would want to defend the actions of a dysfunctional and disastrous Ottoman government that Atatürk eventually opposed.

In his excellent history of the Middle East during the period surrounding World War I, *A Peace to End All Peace*, author David Fromkin writes how Atatürk, in open rebellion to the Sultan who was still titular head of what remained of Ottoman Turkey, sought to separate himself from the policies of the disgraced Ottoman leaders in establishing the new Turkish Republic. Moreover, Atatürk was

a bitter enemy of Enver, a leader of the ruling Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) and one of the architects of policy to expel the Armenian population from Eastern Turkey. Fromkin documents how Enver sought to undercut Atatürk's efforts to form a new nation out of the ruins of the war.

Turkey can justifiably condemn the policies and actions of previous regimes or governments while still asserting pride in its history. In fact, most nations of consequence, foremost among them the United States, have had to confront unpleasant truths about their history. The United States fought a civil war over slavery and yet it took 100 years for a civil rights act to pass that gave African-Americans the equal protection that the Constitution promises. The U.S. has also recognized injustices done to other groups such as Native Americans and Japanese-Americans who were incarcerated in camps during World War II only because of their Japanese heritage. In acknowledging these injustices, the United States has become a better country for all its citizens.

In announcing the closing of the Guantanamo Bay detention facility and in renouncing the use of torture techniques, President Obama has acknowledged to the world that the U.S. has made mistakes. He did so in order to promote broader U.S. policy objectives in the Middle East while strongly promoting the best of America: the values of freedom and democracy that have made America a great nation.

For Turkey to realize its ambition as a regional power, and if indeed it values democratic ideals, it is time for it to take steps, as President Obama said, to confront its own history. As President Obama said in his speech at Cairo University where he spoke about a new beginning in relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world: "It is easier to blame others than to look inward...we should choose the right path, not just the easy path."

I think Turkey would do well to follow this example. As a maturing democracy, the time is right for Turkey to take the "right path" to break the impasse on the Armenian question by making several "grand gestures". This is how:

One would be to announce that it is suspending all its paid lobbying activities with respect to congressional resolutions and instead, that it will dedicate that money to support the work of a historical commission to examine what happened. To ensure its independence from the Turkish Government, the commission would be composed of leading international historians, including Armenian historians that represent all views on the matter to engage in further comprehensive research to compile an authoritative report on the events of 1915 including an index of archival materials. Turkey would open its archives and Armenians should be asked to do the same.

Turkey should also form a commission to acknowledge the 100th anniversary of the 1915 deportations and massacres. This could include historical symposia and a commemoration of a memorial to Armenians and Muslims who died.

A genocide resolution may still occupy some in Congress, but Turkey's actions could defuse its impact. The Turkish Government should proceed with the commission regardless of the status of a congressional genocide resolution or Armenian acceptance of the commission. And, if such a resolution should pass, Turkey should allow the commission's work to continue and forbear taking any action that might harm its relations with the U.S.

Whether other governments or historians decide to label the events of 1915 as genocide or not is not important. What is important is that Turkey not only allows but promotes open and honest debate on the events of 1915 and the attitudes that allowed such a thing to happen.

This open debate and self-searching would have a far reaching impact on Turkey.

First, it would confirm that Turkey has reached the point in its evolution as a democratic state to openly examine its past.

It would earn Turkey enormous good will that would advance Turkey's goals of EU membership and of playing a more prominent role in regional affairs.

It would not force groups that are otherwise supportive of Turkey to take sides against Turkey on this issue.

It would serve to strengthen U.S.-Turkish ties at this critical moment when the need for cooperation between the two countries is paramount.

And finally, it would be an important step towards reconciliation and healing for both Turks and Armenians.