

May 9, 2005

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan
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Dear Prime Minister Erdogan:

A few weeks ago, Your Excellency wrote to Armenian President Robert Kocharyan, proposing a joint group, consisting of historians and other experts, to study “the events of 1915.” The purpose of this initiative would be to “shed light on a disputed period of history and also constitute a step towards contributing to the normalization of relations between” Turkey and Armenia.

We would like you to know that a similar proposal was initiated as far back as September 2001. At that time, the Zoryan Institute, in collaboration with the Turkish-Armenian Business Development Council (TABDC), represented by Mr. Kaan Soyak, its President, developed the outlines of a proposal for a historians’ forum. This was done with the involvement of both Turkish and Armenian scholars. The goal of the forum was to create a platform for historians where a conceptual framework would be developed to discuss historical facts, especially as they relate to the treatment of the Armenians by the Ottoman authorities in the last days of the Ottoman Empire, during World War I. The discussion would be free and open, enabling both societies to deal with their past. The forum would also disseminate, without censorship, information through seminars, colloquia, conferences, and public discussions and would make available the archival and source documentation for this subject through the broadcast media. At that time, Mr. Soyak let us know that the Turkish Government was intimately informed about this initiative, and that the TABDC was to take the proposal to the Turkish government for its approval. Unfortunately, such approval was never obtained, we believe, because “diverging interpretations of events that took place during a particular period...continue to hamper the development of friendly relations between” Armenia and Turkey today, as you note in your letter.

In order to help reconcile these divergent interpretations, the two sides must listen to and hear each other. As part of this process, a common body of knowledge needs to be created, so that established facts can help alleviate the polarization of opinions. This, in turn, will lead to the “peaceful and friendly environment in which tolerance and mutual respect shall prevail.” Therefore,

we at the Zoryan Institute urge your government to take some simple steps to allow for a free and open discussion within Turkish society, such as those listed below.

- 1) Facilitate critical scholars educating society about the events of 1915 from different points of view and not only from the government's perspective.
- 2) Allow the broadcast of a series of lectures on this issue by renowned Armenian, Turkish and/or third party scholars, who do not necessarily reflect the government's official position, through Turkish television networks, without any censorship, and with the accessibility to the public for questions.
- 3) Allow Turkish academics and intellectuals, whose point of view challenges the official version of what happened in 1915, to express their ideas through public lectures, publications, and translations of Ottoman archival materials, without fear of persecution by the state.
- 4) In this respect, make unequivocally and publicly clear that Article 305 of the Penal Code, which criminalizes "acts against the fundamental national interest," does not pertain to the "Armenian Genocide" issue, and that individuals who say that the Armenians suffered a genocide will not be persecuted by the state.

In its turn, Armenia should be willing to allow public access there to the official Turkish point of view, in the same manner.

It takes considerable time to conceptualize new approaches to large problems, which have eluded solution for generations. At the same time, there are many useful, small, confidence-building steps that can be taken on the road to finding that solution. Therefore, we strongly urge the Turkish Government to accept the call of Armenian Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian for your two countries to establish diplomatic relations, with no preconditions, as a first step to commencing dialogue. This would demonstrate the sincerity of your government regarding the normalization of relations between the two countries.

Dear Mr. Prime Minister, by such steps described above, you will help accelerate the creation of bridges between various sectors of the two governments and civil societies, so crucial for normalization of relations and conflict resolution. We urge you not to miss the opportunity at this juncture of accepting the outstretched hand of friendship from Armenia, as a previous Turkish government missed during the early 1990s. Please be assured that

we at Zoryan Institute stand ready to support all earnest efforts to promote Turkish-Armenian dialogue through our expertise and scholarly resources.

Yours respectfully,

[signed]

Roger W. Smith, Chair, Academic Board of Directors

Cc: President Robert Kocharyan, Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian, Special Advisor to UN Secretary General Juan Mendez