

# Open Letter to Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu

March 28, 2010

Your Excellency Mr. Ahmet Davutoğlu:

You are right to want to normalize relations not only with Armenia, but also Armenians in the Diaspora, and you will find that most Armenians also want to normalize relations, but without any preconditions.

You are right that Diaspora Armenians are not one category. Four generations removed from 1915, they are integrated in their adopted countries and some are totally assimilated. They see themselves as American, Argentinean, French, Iranian, Lebanese, Russian or Syrian. There are some who have married Moslems and converted to Islam. They are all quite different from each other, depending on where they live.

They all share a common history and unshakeable trauma, however, resulting from the crime of genocide committed by the Ottoman Turks in 1915. This has created a very strong collective sense of responsibility in them to pursue justice. If the “prominent names who participated in the funeral after the death of Hrant Dink” in 2007 were touched when Turkish people embraced Hrant Dink,” it is because those Turks carrying placards saying “we all are Armenians” were in fact acknowledging that their countrymen who had killed Hrant Dink displayed the same mentality as that of the Young Turks in 1915.

I am sure that the Armenian people worldwide would embrace the whole nation of Turkey, if the Government of Turkey acknowledged the responsibility of its predecessor, the Ottoman Government, in the planned annihilation of its Armenian citizens, expressed a sincere apology, and made appropriate efforts at atonement. That would build trust between the parties and allow peace to prevail.

“We need to show empathy in order to understand what Armenians lived through and what they felt, but they need to show respect to our memory.... 1915 may be the year of the deportations [tehcir] but, at the same time, it is the year of Canakkale [Battle of Gallipoli].” This is very misguided, because while Armenians were not the cause of Canakkale, the Ottoman government was the cause of the annihilation of their Armenian citizens. One can understand the trauma of Turkish soldiers fighting for their country’s existence, but how is this comparable to the atrocities committed against unarmed Armenian civilians? Should we equate the pain and the suffering of the Jews and others resulting from the Holocaust to the pain of the Germans who were killed by the Allies during World War II, which was started by their government?

You state “The issue has a psychological dimension. It has a legal dimension. And a political and historical dimension.” For Turks, they are embodied in the loss of a massive amount of the territory of the Empire, the expulsion of the Moslems from the Balkans, the intervention of the Europeans in Ottoman internal affairs, and the existential struggle for the existence of the country. For Armenians, they are embodied in the massacres of 1894-1896, when some 200,000 Armenians were slaughtered, then in the Adana massacres in 1909, when 15,000 to 30,000 Armenians were killed, followed by the deportations and murders of 1915 to 1922, when some

1.5 million Armenians were annihilated. This mistreatment continued after the establishment of the Turkish Republic with the destruction of Armenian cultural monuments and churches, the confiscation of church assets, the forced assimilation and name changes, the Varlik Vergisi of 1942, the assassination of Hrant Dink in 2007, when the police had their picture taken proudly with Ogun Samast and holding the Turkish flag as if they were part of a great patriotic event. These all display a deep and persistent hostility towards the Armenians and other non-Turkish minorities in your country, for which no one in Turkey has ever been called to account, and this impunity has only encouraged further acts of hostility and political violence. Most recently, on March 17, 2010, the threat of your own Prime Minister, Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, to deport Armenians from Turkey reveals the extent of political violence in the Turkish psyche and a complete disrespect for human rights.

The people of the world are becoming increasingly aware of the phenomenon of genocide every day. These are people with a strong commitment to universal human rights. They demand their governments intervene to prevent injustices, such as in Darfur. They understand that to be able to prevent genocide from recurring, they have to stop being accomplices in the denial of genocide. That is why places like Catalonia, Sweden and the United States House Foreign Relations Committee still pass resolutions recognizing the Armenian Genocide. Because forgetting and impunity for violence encourage further violence.

You say that “If intellectuals and politicians fulfill the parts that fall on their shoulders, a new and possibly a more rooted period of peace stretches before us.” We heartily agree. Therefore, please give your intellectuals the freedom to talk openly about the historical facts surrounding 1915. Do not prosecute them when they speak about these events as genocide. Do not call them “traitors trying to stab the nation from the back” when they organize conferences as they did in Istanbul in 2005. Do not let them be killed like Hrant Dink.

Most Armenians can distinguish between the Turkey of 1915 and that of today. No one holds any Turk living today responsible for the crime of the genocide committed by the Ottomans. Yet, they do hold your country and your government responsible for the act of denial, which itself is considered the continuation of the crime of genocide.

“Defending our national honour” will occur when your own countrymen are allowed to learn about their history without risk of persecution. This would empower them with the knowledge to find a new language for dialogue. That is the most important psychological barrier to overcome. When your country is able to accept the fact that there was a planned annihilation of the Armenians in 1915, not only would you find “Armenian communities with which you will be able to start a dialogue,” but you would be able to win the hearts and the minds of the people of your neighbouring country, the Republic of Armenia, and Armenians worldwide would become ambassadors of goodwill for Turkey and its people.

Respectfully yours,  
K. M. Greg Sarkissian