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Echoes of a Genocide: The Turkish prime minister's anti-Armenian outburst

By Marko Attila Hoare, 26th March 2010

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

- 1. Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's recent threat to expel a hundred thousand ethnic Armenians from Turkey is the latest indication of his government's retreat from democratic European values in favour of a populist, chauvinist authoritarianism.**
- 2. Grippled as it is by the conflict between Erdogan's Justice and Development Party government and the old Turkish secular establishment, Turkey is at a crossroads between further democratisation, a retreat into authoritarianism and political chaos. The**

cause of democratisation would best be served by a complete victory for neither side.

3. Rather than provoking Turkish nationalism by recognising formally the Armenian Genocide, Western states should encourage Turkey's democratisation, by demanding that it allow its citizens to discuss and debate what happened to the Armenians in 1915 without fear of persecution.

For all the criticisms that I and others have levelled against the chauvinism of Balkan states such as Serbia and Greece, it must be conceded that such chauvinism has one redeeming feature: it is the chauvinism of relatively small states, hence always somewhat ridiculous. The nationalist posturing of such states, replete with references to mythologised glorious histories, is the posturing of the little man who walks into a bar and brags about how big he is. In this sense, such chauvinism and posturing can never quite compare to that of a really large, powerful state. The **threat** of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, to expel 100,000 ethnic Armenians from Turkey, is therefore uniquely terrifying: 'There are currently 170,000 Armenians living in our country. Only 70,000 of them are Turkish citizens, but we are tolerating the remaining 100,000. If necessary, I may have to tell these 100,000 to go back to their country because they are not my citizens. I don't have to keep them in my country.' The threat was made in response to moves by the US Congress and the Swedish parliament to recognise the Armenian Genocide of 1915. Such posturing is that of a thug who really is one of the biggest and strongest in the bar. At the same time, Erdogan has not only rejected the term 'genocide' in relation to what happened to the Armenians in 1915, but **denied** that Turkey had even every been guilty of atrocities: 'Our warriors always respected ancestral laws and did not kill innocent people even on the battlefield. I should underline that this country's soldier is bigger than history and that this country's history is as clean and clear as the sun. No country's parliament can tarnish it.'

Erdogan's chauvinistic outburst proves that the extreme Turkish nationalism

responsible for the Armenian Genocide and for the killing or expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Greeks during the 1920s (many of whom were Turkish-speaking Anatolians deemed ‘Greek’ only by virtue of being Christians) still very much dominates the mind-set of the Turkish political classes. It is a nationalism born out of the decay of the Ottoman Empire, in which repeated interventions by Christian Europe on behalf of the Ottomans’ Christian subjects and the resulting Ottoman territorial losses gave rise to a genocidal Turkish impulse vis-a-vis Anatolian Christians, identified as they were as agents of foreign enemies and threats to the territorial integrity of the state. The Turkish War of Independence of the 1920s was at once a legitimate war of national liberation against West European imperialism and Greek aggression, and a murderous assault on the remaining Anatolian Christians that culminated in the burning of the city of Smyrna in 1922 and the massacre of its Greek and Armenian inhabitants. The Turkish victory in that war and the establishment of the Turkish republic halted the Ottoman/Turkish territorial decline, but the readiness to attack and expel members of Christian nationalities remained. As late as 1955, the Turkish government of Adnan Menderes orchestrated a massive anti-Greek pogrom in Istanbul, as a way of pressurising Greece over the Cyprus question, resulting in the virtual disappearance through emigration of Istanbul’s up-till-then large and thriving Greek community. Against this background, Erdogan’s anti-Armenian outburst needs to be taken seriously.

Ironically, Turkey’s governing Justice and Development Party (AKP), to which Erdogan and President Abdullah Gul (who recently won the Chatham House Prize for 2010) belong, represents the moderate wing of traditional Turkish nationalism. The AKP government has improved the rights of Turkey’s Kurdish minority and pursued detente with Cyprus and Armenia. On the other hand, the AKP government has developed a populist **Islamic chauvinism** of its own, involving demagogic **diatribes** against Israel, flirtation with **anti-Semitism** and support for Omar Hassan al-Bashir’s genocidal Islamist regime in Sudan. Erdogan has denied that the latter is guilty of genocide in Darfur, claiming that ‘Muslims don’t commit genocide’. This Islamic populism has gone hand in hand with increasing government **assaults on the media**, most notably the imposition of a \$2.5

billion fine on Dogan Yayin Holding, Turkey's biggest media group. Meanwhile, Ankara is developing increasingly close friendships with authoritarian states in the region hostile to the West, above all Russia, Iran and [Syria](#).

The AKP regime's drift away from the West and from Western values must be blamed in large part on Ankara's increasing loss of confidence in the prospect of EU membership, above all on account of French and German opposition. The appointment of the strongly anti-Turkish and anti-Islamic Herman Van Rompuy as President of the European Council last autumn has only increased the justified impression in Turkey that Europe fundamentally does not want it. 'Turkey is not a part of Europe and will never be part of Europe', said [Van Rompuy](#) in 2004; 'An expansion of the EU to include Turkey cannot be considered as just another expansion as in the past. The universal values which are in force in Europe, and which are also fundamental values of Christianity, will lose vigour with the entry of a large Islamic country such as Turkey.' This is something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. The carrot of EU membership was a major catalyst for the impressive democratisation of Turkey that took place during the early years of the AKP government. With the carrot apparently unattainable, a major incentive to democratise has gone. The Western alliance is now paying a heavy geopolitical price for French and German selfishness and narrow-mindedness, and for Islamophobia of the Van Rompuy variety.

For all its increasing authoritarianism and Islamic populism, the AKP government remains in one respect a driving force behind further democratisation: it is successfully [taming](#) the Turkish military, which has been responsible for overthrowing several democratically elected Turkish governments in the past. The Turkish government has every right to pursue and punish elements in the military that plot coups and internal disorder. Yet there are reasons to fear that the huge '[Ergenekon](#)' investigation of these elements is also being used to [hound](#) the AKP's political opponents. The democratically elected AKP government is successfully overturning an old authoritarian order, but threatens to establish a new authoritarianism in its place. In the struggle between the old Kemalist establishment and the new

Islamic middle class represented by the AKP, a total defeat for either side would be bad for democracy; the two sides should rather become the two wings of a pluralistic Turkey – like the Social Democrats and Christian Democrats in Germany, or the Republicans and Democrats in the US.

Turkey, in other words, is a country at a political crossroads: between democracy, authoritarianism and political chaos at home and between a Western and anti-Western authoritarianism abroad. It is in the vital interests of the Western alliance to steer Turkey as much as possible in a pro-democratic, pro-Western direction. The alternative is an authoritarian, anti-Semitic regime – either in Islamist or extreme-nationalist Kemalist garb - allied to the West's enemies abroad.

In these circumstances, parliamentary resolutions in Western countries recognising the Armenian genocide are equivalent to pouring petrol on the flames. Such resolutions are objectively anti-Turkish: many members of the Western alliance, not to mention of the wider international community, have historically been guilty of genocide or of crimes on a par with genocide, yet it is Turkey alone – *alone* - whose historic crimes are being singled out for parliamentary recognition by its own supposed allies. If the Armenian Genocide is being recognised by parliaments that have absolutely no intention of recognising the genocide of the Native Americans or the Australian aborigines, for example, or the European powers' colonial crimes in Africa and Asia – some of which undoubtedly constituted genocide or were on a par with it – then Turkey has every reason to view such recognition as aggressive and hostile. Many citizens of Turkey are descended from Balkan and Caucasian Muslim peoples who were the victims of genocidal crimes at the hands of Russia and the Balkan Christian states during the eighteenth, nineteenth or early twentieth centuries; the hypocrisy of Western states that remain silent about these crimes while formally recognising the Armenian Genocide is clear to everyone in Turkey.

The tragedy is that such Western hypocrisy discredits the cause of Armenian Genocide recognition in Turkey itself and hands a powerful trump card to the Turkish government, which has long been aggressively persecuting those

Turkish citizens brave enough to speak about about what happened to the Armenians in 1915. Defying popular chauvinism and government intimidation, over 22,000 Turkish citizens signed a [petition](#) in 2008 apologising for the crime against the Armenians: ‘My conscience does not accept the insensitivity showed to and the denial of the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915. I reject this injustice and for my share, I empathize with the feelings and pain of my Armenian brothers and sisters. I apologize to them.’

This growing movement in Turkey to reject the national chauvinist paradigm and come to terms with the country’s historical crimes represents an essential part of Turkey’s democratisation. Turkey will only become a genuine democracy when its citizens are free to discuss what happened to the Armenians in 1915, and to call it genocide if they wish, without fear of persecution or arrest. The tragedy is that clumsy, hypocritical genocide resolutions actually set this process back. As the [New York Times](#) reported earlier this month: ‘Turkish intellectuals had made some progress at pushing the [Armenian] issue into the public debate. Ethnic Armenians in Turkey fear that passage of the [genocide]resolution by the full House — which would be unprecedented — would seriously harm those efforts.’ As Turkish university professor [Soli Ozel](#) said back in December 2008, ‘If they were to free Turkey of the pressures [of these bills], we would be able to talk about the issue in a more desirable way.’ So long as the Turkish government can present the campaign for the recognition of the Armenian Genocide as the work of the international Armenian lobby and hypocritical anti-Turkish governments, it only weakens the position of those brave and principled Turks who wish to wish to raise the issue at home. As Ergodan’s chauvinistic outburst threatens, there is always the danger that the AKP government, frightened for its political future, will respond to further foreign recognitions of the Armenian Genocide by retaliating against its own Armenian minority. This is quite apart from the fact that such recognitions will only further alienate Turkey and the Turkish public from the Western alliance and push them into the arms of our enemies, and that they are [highly problematic](#) from the point of view of genocide scholarship as well.

There is a simple way in which the Armenian Genocide issue can become a help rather than a hindrance to Turkey's democratisation: instead of passing resolutions recognising the Armenian Genocide, Western parliaments should pass resolutions calling upon Turkey to permit the issue to be freely debated at home and abroad; to desist from arresting, persecuting or intimidating anyone for stating their opinion about what happened to the Armenians in 1915. Unlike parliamentary recognition of genocide, there would be nothing hypocritical about this: the US, Britain and other EU and NATO members do not for the most part recognise their own or each other's historic acts of genocide, but they do permit these crimes to be freely discussed and debated.

A democratic Turkey's membership of the EU would tremendously strengthen Western security. But so long as Turkey threatens its minorities and criminalises mention of the Armenian Genocide, it does not deserve membership. Turkey should be encouraged to become a pillar of Europe, rather than an embarrassment to it.

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