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# **NOTHING PERSONAL: TURKEY'S TOP TEN**

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## NOTHING PERSONAL: TURKEY'S TOP TEN

Yerevan—That an Armenian repatriate, American-born into a legacy of remembrance inherited from a line of survivors of genocide nearly a century ago, feels compelled to entitle his thoughts with a focus on Turkey—and not Armenia—reveals a larger problem, a gaping wound, and an imperative for closure long overdue on both sides of history's tragic divide.

The new Armenia, independent of its longstanding statelessness since 1991, *is* my everyday life, as are the yearnings of my fellow citizens for their daily dignity, true democracy, the rule of law, and an empowering end to sham elections and the corruption, arrogance and unaccountability of power. Having suffered so much in the past, from the Ottoman Empire to the Soviet Union, today the Armenian people ironically are deprived in their own Republic of the very rights and freedoms that foreign empires had so often violently denied them. Armenia deserves good governance and better leadership across the board, and that time must come to pass.

“Generation next” is neither victim nor subject, nor any longer an infidel “millet.” We seek not, in obsequious supplicancy, to curry the favor of the world's strong and self-important, whose interests often trump their own principles and whose geopolitics engulf the professed values of liberty and justice for all. Gone are the residual resources for kissing up or behind.

And so, with a clarity of conscience and a goodness of heart, I expect Turkey and its administration to address the multiple modern challenges they face and offer to this end a list of realities, not commandments, that will help enable a new era of regional understanding and the globalization of a peaceful order that countenances neither victims nor victimizers.

1. *Measure sevenfold, cut once*: This old local adage suggests a neat lesson for contemporary officials. Before launching, at Davos or elsewhere, pedantic missiles in condemnation of the excesses of others, think fully about the substance and implications of your invectives and your standing to articulate them. This is not a narrow Armenian assertion; it includes all relevant dimensions, including Cyprus, the Kurds, the Assyrians, the Alewis, the Jewish and other minorities. Occupation, for its part, is the last word Turkish representatives should be showering in different directions at different international fora, lest someone require a textbook definition of duplicity. Maintain dignity but tread lightly, for history is a powerful and lasting precedent.

2. *Self-reflection*: Democracies achieve domestic success, applicants accomplish European integration, and countries become regional drivers only when they have the political courage and moral fortitude to undergo this process. Face yourself, your own conduct, and the track record of state on behalf of which you speak. Not only the success stories and points of pride, but the whole deal. Be honest and brave about it; you do possess the potential to graduate from decades of denialism. Recent trends in civil society, however tentative and preliminary, attest to this.

3. *The Armenian genocide*: Don't fidget for the escape hatch, take responsibility. There is so much evidentiary documentation in the US National Archives, the British Public Record Office, the Quai d'Orsay, and even the German military archives to disarm the various instruments of official denial that have been employed over the years. But this is only the paperwork. The most damning testimony is not in the killing of more than a million human souls in a manifest execution of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's first genocide or, in the words of the American ambassador reporting at the time, "race extermination."

4. *Homeland-killing*: Worse than genocide, as incredible as that sounds, is the premeditated deprivation of a people of its ancestral heartland. And that's precisely what happened. In what amounted to the Great Armenian Dispossession, a nation living for more than three millennia upon its historic patrimony—at times amid its own sovereign kingdoms and more frequently as a subject of occupying empires—was in a matter of months brutally, literally, and completely eradicated from its land. Unprecedented in human history, this expropriation of homes and lands, churches and monasteries, schools and colleges, libraries and hospitals, properties and infrastructures constitutes to this day a murder, not only of a people, but of a civilization, a culture, a time-earned way of life. This is where the debate about calling it genocide or not becomes absurd, trivial, and tertiary. A homeland was exterminated by the Turkish republic's predecessor and under the world's watchful eye, and we're negotiating a word. Even that term is not enough to encompass the magnitude of the crime.

5. *Coming clean*: It is the only way to move forward. This is not a threat, but a statement of plain, unoriginal fact. Don't be afraid of the price tag. What the Armenians lost is priceless. Instead of constantly and viscerally attempting to flee this catastrophic legacy through the decoy of counterarguments and commissions of various kinds, return to the real script. And rather than complain about or anticipate Armenian demands, undertake your own critical introspection and say what you plan to do to right the wrong, to atone for and to educate, to revive and restore, and to celebrate—yes, you, we and Hrant together—the Armenian heritage of what is today eastern Turkey. Finally take the initiative that you have not yet launched, the one that leads to a real reconciliation based on the terrible truth but bolstered by a fresh call to candor.

6. *Never again*: The rewards of coming to this reality check far outweigh its perils. What is unfortunately unique about the Holocaust is not the evil of the Shoah itself, but the demeanor of postwar Germany to face history and itself, to assume responsibility for the crimes of the preceding regime, to mourn and to dignify, to seek forgiveness and make redemption, and to incorporate this ethic into the public consciousness and the methodology of state. Germany, now a leader in the democratic world, has only gained and grown from its demeanor. Brandt's kneeling should not remain unique. A veritable leader of the new Turkey, the European one of the future, might do the same, not in cession but in full expression of his and his nation's pride and honor. My grandmother, who survived the genocide owing to the human heights of a blessed Turkish neighbor who sheltered little Khengeni of Ordu from the fate of her family, did not live to see that day.

7. *The politics of power:* Turkey's allies can help it along this way. Whether it's from Washington and its transatlantic partners, the European Union, the Muslim world or even Moscow, to which Ankara has most interestingly been warming up of late, the message might be delivered that, in the third millennium AD, the world will be governed by a different set of rules, that might will respect right, that no crime against humanity or its denial will be tolerated. The Obama Administration bears the burden, but has the capacity for this leadership of light. And it will be tested soon and again.

8. *Turkey and Armenia:* These sovereign neighbors have never, in all of history, entered into a bilateral agreement with each other. Whether diplomatic, economic, political, territorial, or security-specific, no facet of their relationship, or the actual absence thereof, is regulated by a contract freely and fairly entered into between the two republics. It's about time. Hence, the process of official contacts and reciprocal visits that unraveled in the wake of a Turkey-Armenia soccer match in September 2008 should mind this gap and structure the discourse not to run away from the divides emanating from the past, but to bridge them through the immediate establishment of diplomatic relations without the positing or posturing of preconditions, the lifting of Turkey's unlawful border blockade, and a comprehensive discussion and negotiated resolution of all outstanding matters based on an acceptance of history and the commitment to a future guaranteed against its recurrence. Nor should the fact of dialogue, as facially laudable as it is, be pitched in an insincere justification to deter third-party parliaments, and particularly the US Congress, from adopting decisions or resolutions that simply seek to reaffirm the historical record. Such comportment, far from the statesmanship many expect, would contradict the aim and spirit of any rapprochement.

9. *The past as present:* The current Armenian state covers a mere fraction of the vast expanse of the great historical plateau upon which the Armenians lived from the depths of BC until the surgical disgorge of homeland and humanity that was 1915. Having managed for seventy years as the smallest of the republics of the USSR, Soviet Armenia was the sole remnant component of the patrimony in which the Armenians were permitted by the Soviet-Turkish accords of 1921-- the Armenian equivalents of Molotov-Ribbentrop—to maintain a collective existence under the Kremlin's jurisdiction. Even such obviously Armenian homesteads as Mountainous Karabagh and Nakhichevan were severed by Bolshevik-Kemalist complicity and placed, in exercise of Stalin's divide-and-conquer facility, under the suzerainty of Soviet Azerbaijan. Accordingly, as improbable as it seems in view of its ethnic kinship with Azerbaijan, modern-day Turkey also carries the charge to discard outdated and pursue corrective policies in the Caucasus. This high duty applies not only to a qualitatively improved and cleansed rapport with the Republic of Armenia, but also in respect of new realities in the region.

10. *Mountainous Karabagh from sea to shining sea:* Called Artsakh in Armenian, this easternmost territory of the Armenian Plateau declared its independence from Soviet Azerbaijan in 1991 in full compliance with controlling Soviet legislation, customary international law, and the Montevideo Convention. Against the odds of a David-and-Goliath struggle for liberty and identity, its people valiantly defended their hearths and homes first against provocations and pogroms, and then in the face of "Grad" rocket launchers, cluster and other indiscriminate aerial

bombings of civilian targets, and finally in response to an all-out war of aggression that brought together as bedfellows the Azerbaijani military, Turkish advisers and through them NATO-vintage materiel, “mujaheddin” mercenaries, and some transitional rogue units from the devolving Soviet army.

Almost miraculous in view of the tragedy of modern history, the Armenians of Artsakh were able to successfully defend their homeland, secure their frontiers from further attack, and ultimately resist the temptation of an excessive counter-offensive, so signing a ceasefire with Azerbaijan in May 1994. Unlike Nakhichevan—where no Armenians remain today and where even the final vestiges of Armenian cultural heritage have been defaced and destroyed, as recently as December 2005, by an official policy of the Azerbaijani state—Mountainous Karabagh held its own and most exceptionally surmounted the Stalinist legacy of subjugation and colonization. Turkey, as Azerbaijan’s proxy in the wider world and as an important political contributor, must come to respect Karabagh’s choice and include it in any platforms or other initiatives brought to the regional table. Of course, the diplomatic agenda continues to comprise such issues as the return of refugees to their places of origin, the opening of communications, demilitarization and peacekeeping, territorial adjustments and security guarantees, but none of these can or will happen unilaterally or in one direction only. Mutuality is key in every category, and the final agreement of the parties, together with the ensuing supervisory regime, must attach equally to all from the Caspian to the Black Sea. When considering, for instance, the secured right of voluntary return for refugees and their progeny, or else a reactivation of normal transportation avenues, the scope of these provisions and the related security protocols must embrace Azerbaijan, Mountainous Karabagh, Armenia, and Turkey. In this sense, a durable and equitable resolution of the Azerbaijan-Karabagh standoff is substantively derivative from the Turkish-Armenian relationship and the course of its development.

On the road to inevitable self-discovery, Turkey, its future with Armenia, and their immediate neighborhood have come to form one of the planet’s most sensitive and seismic tectonic plates. Neo-imperial interests and raw power in their pursuit can no longer control the shift. Integrity, equity, and a bit of humility might help to save the day. And our world.

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