

May 7, 2010

The Honorable Barack H. Obama
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

On April 24, you issued a statement marking Armenian Remembrance Day.

Turkish Americans share the grief of Armenian Americans who lost family members during those dreadful events nearly a century ago. In fact, over 50 Turkish American associations sent a joint letter to you in 2009, stating that Turkish Americans mourn Armenian losses as their own.

However, too many forget or even deny the equally tragic loss of millions of Muslim lives in this turbulent period of Ottoman history. Too silently, perhaps, do Turks mourn the ethnic cleansing of Ottoman Muslims from eastern Anatolia, the Caucasus and the Balkans between 1821 and 1922, when as many as 5 million died and 5.5 million became refugees. Were these not among the "worst atrocities" of the 19th and 20th centuries? One group's suffering does not justify or negate another's, and all who lost their lives, regardless of ethnicity and religion, deserve to be remembered on this day of remembrance.

Respectfully, we disagree with your April 24 statement insofar as it states that Armenian losses from these events were 1.5 million. To dispute this figure is not to deny the Ottoman Armenian tragedy. Nonetheless, employing an inflated figure does a great disservice to the pursuit of truth and hampers honest efforts to provide a full understanding of the Ottoman Armenian experience, making rapprochement more difficult between Turks and Armenians who share a rich and centuries-long history.

Though counting civilian losses during wartime is far from an exact science, a strict population deficit study points toward the inaccuracy of the figure you have employed. Please consider that nearly every contemporary source of population figures in the late Ottoman Empire, whether Christian missionary, foreign diplomat, or government, estimates the pre-World War I Armenian population at between 1 and 1.6 million. The Ottoman census recorded a figure of 1.22 million. The only figures that exceed 1.6 million generally appeared decades later, derived from sources with no connection to the events on the ground. The United States' own emissary to the Paris Peace Conference, George Montgomery, who was raised in eastern Anatolia as the son of missionaries, estimated a pre-war population of 1.6 million. Montgomery later estimated that two-thirds of the Ottoman Armenians survived the war and losses likely did not exceed 500,000. The Commission on the Responsibility of the Authors of War and on Enforcement of Penalties Subcommittee described Armenian losses as, "more than 200,000." The 1.5 million figure you employed is controversial and, therefore, ought to be one of the many elements to be discussed by historians as part of the Turkish-Armenian reconciliation process.

Indeed, the warp and woof of Turkish-Armenian history can only be fully unearthed with the establishment of a joint historical commission tasked with uncovering the complete historical narrative, which will acknowledge the guilty and innocent on all sides, place painful events in their contemporary context and, thereby, pave the way for reconciliation between the Turkish and Armenian people. We, therefore, urge you to continue supporting the establishment of such a commission.

Finally, we would like to voice our gratitude for the support that you and your Administration have shown for the ongoing peaceful dialogue between Turkey and Armenia and hope that the United States will continue to play a positive role in rebuilding mutual understanding between the two nations and peoples.

Respectfully yours,

G. Lincoln McCurdy
President

Cc: The Honorable Hillary R. Clinton