
UNETHICAL TO USE CENTURY-OLD PAIN TO PRESSURE TURKEY, ARMENIAN PATRIARCH MAŞALYAN SAYS

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A controversial bill recently adopted by the U.S. Senate recognizing the unfortunate events that pitted Ottoman Muslims and Armenians against each other during World War I as genocide drew the ire of the leader of Turkey's Armenian community.

Patriarch Sahak Maşalyan, the newly elected head of the Armenian Orthodox Church, told the Sabah daily that the Armenian "thesis" put forward to pressurize Turkey creates a sense of exploitation for the community, adding that this cannot be considered ethical.

"It is upsetting for us, Turkey's Armenians, that the pain that was felt in these territories 100 years is used as an element of strategic, economic and political pressure in other countries' parliaments. We consider this as an inappropriate situation directed against our ancestors," Patriarch Maşalyan said.

"There is a political dimension to this. I'm not a politician and it is up to politicians to define this. As the Armenian community, we are people that have integrated into Turkey. We have made a union of fate with this country. We have established a life in harmony with all elements of this country. We have forgotten what happened 100 years ago by remembrance. This is a choice of Istanbul's Armenian community. We have chosen to live in this country, and this is something that differentiates us from the Armenians of Armenia and the diaspora. We lived the 1915 trauma and somehow treated it while staying in this country. Political issues developing out of Turkey's Armenians unavoidably affect us too. Provoking such things inside Turkey also increases hate speech," he added.

Ottoman Armenians had long been an influential community with a sizable share in the economy and an integral part of the empire, often holding important bureaucratic posts. With the empire's apparent decline in the 19th century and the rise of liberal, socialist and nationalist movements throughout the world, various political groups formed among Ottoman Armenians. Although the majority of these groups initially called for reforms and liberalization of the empire and worked with similar groups dominated by Muslims to achieve these goals, some later started calling for territorial autonomy or independence in eastern Anatolia, where Muslim Turks and Kurds were the majority. These groups often resorted to terrorist acts to enforce their demands or armed violence against government forces and locals to carve up Armenian-dominated enclaves, seeking foreign intervention from European powers and Russia, which had become the dominating power in the

Caucasus region. Amid a rapid disintegration of the empire and the influx of hundreds of migrants from the Balkans and the Caucasus, retribution from government forces and local Muslim bands were often harsh, with massacres committed by both sides in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, leading to tens of thousands of civilian casualties.

Decades of ethnic and religious strife culminated in the events of 1915 when some Armenian groups in eastern Anatolia sided with invading Russians and revolted against Ottoman forces. A subsequent relocation of Armenians ordered by the Ottoman government at the time resulted in numerous casualties, added by massacres from militaries and militia groups of both sides. Historians siding with Armenian claims argue that some 1.5 million Armenians perished during this period, whereas Turkish historians say that this number is highly inflated; more than 500,000 Muslims were slaughtered by Armenian rebel groups during the same period.

Starting with the mid-19th century, the U.S. joined other European powers in establishing diplomatic missions in eastern Anatolia as well as schools, hospitals and other public institutions run by Protestant missionaries, who often conducted religious activities to the discomfort of the traditional Armenian church. As a rising trend at the time, many Ottoman Armenians migrated to the U.S. in the late 19th century seeking a new and prosperous life. Following the atrocities of 1915, many others soon joined, forming an influential community with a significant presence in the U.S. state of California. Starting from the 1970s, Armenian diaspora groups in the U.S. started to push for recognition of the 1915 events as "genocide," with subsequent efforts also launched in Europe. In the meantime, a terror campaign targeting Turkish diplomats and their families was also launched by the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) and the Justice Commandos for the Armenian Genocide (JCAG) terrorist groups, with the latter later renamed the Armenian Revolutionary Army (ARA).

Recognition of the 1915 events as "genocide" had for decades stalled in Congress, stymied by concerns about relations with NATO ally and Cold War strategic partner, Turkey. However, the issue has resurfaced over and over again when Ankara and Washington suffered setbacks in bilateral relations. The Democratic-led House of Representatives finally passed the resolution by an overwhelming 405-11 late October. It was followed by the U.S. Senate on Thursday unanimously passing a resolution that recognizes the so-called "genocide." The moves come when Turkish-American relations are at an all-time low over various issues such as U.S. support for the PKK-linked YPG terrorist group in Syria, Turkey's pending extradition request for Gülenist Terror Group (FETÖ) head Fetullah Gülen and demands to call for a crackdown on FETÖ activities in the country, Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defense systems and increasing U.S. protectionism in trade.

Successive U.S. presidents have also refrained from calling the deaths of Armenians "genocide," but former President Barack Obama adopted the Armenian phrase "Meds Yeghern," or "Great Crime," to describe the tragedy, a practice repeated by Donald Trump.

Turkey objects the presentation of the incidents as "genocide" but describes the 1915 events as a tragedy where both sides suffered casualties. Ankara has repeatedly proposed the creation of a joint commission of historians from Turkey and Armenia along with international experts to tackle the issue.

Dialogue between Turkey, Armenia key to solving problems

"We would have wished that the problem that took place on this soil to be spoken by people living on this soil. Especially, relations between Turkey and Armenia should be improved, parties should talk. Since the parties cannot talk, it gives the right talk to third, fourth parties, those who are across the ocean. I wish that protocols between Armenia and Turkey could have been realized, Vienna meetings could have been established and joint history commissions could have been formed. All these are things that we should settle. This is being used as a bargaining chip to corner Turkey since all these are postponed," Maşalyan said.

The patriarch was referring to the two protocols signed between Ankara and Yerevan in October 2009 in a bid to restore diplomatic ties and bilateral relations, which was severed in 1993 following Armenia's invasion of Azerbaijan's autonomous Nagorno-Karabakh region and surrounding territories.

Following the brief war of 2008 between Russia and Georgia and its aftermath, Turkey and Armenia were urged by both domestic factors and the international community to start an initiative to normalize their relations. The war threatened energy supply from the oil-rich Caspian region, while it further increased Armenia's isolation and poverty as its only route through world markets, passing through Georgia, was blocked by Russia.

Meanwhile, Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink's murder in 2007 shocked Turkish society and it largely transformed the public opinion regarding the bitter past with their Armenian neighbors. As Turkey and Armenia paired in the 2010 FIFA World Cup qualifiers, presidents of both countries exchanged visits for the game, paving the way for the accords of 2009 facilitated by Switzerland. However, neither parliament has approved the deal while both countries have accused each other of walking away from their commitments. Turkey, an ally of the Turkic nation of Azerbaijan, had always stated that the normalization of relations with Armenia depends on a solution between the two Caucasus states. A quarter of Azerbaijan's land has been under the control of Armenian soldiers and local Armenian forces since a 1994 cease-fire that ended a six-year war. The protocols also proposed an impartial scientific examination of historical records and archives to settle the controversy on 1915 events.

Armenian community happy to elect their patriarch after 12 years

The Armenian Orthodox Patriarchate has the largest congregation in the 65,000-strong Turkish-Armenian community, and its roots can be traced back to the conquest of Istanbul by the Ottomans and Mehmed II (Mehmed the Conqueror) who is credited with paving the way for the establishment of a patriarchate. The patriarchate was an influential religious authority for Armenian communities around the world until the early 20th century, but its influence has decreased over time, especially after the Armenian population in Turkey diminished following the 1915 events. Still, the patriarchate is the legal representative of the Armenian Gregorian congregation and holds significant value in the eyes of the Armenian community.

Patriarch Maşalyan's post had been vacant for 12 years over a controversial process to elect the new leader of the community. The dispute began when the late Patriarch Mesrob II fell ill due to dementia, which was diagnosed in 2008. Under Turkish laws and patriarchate rules, a new patriarch cannot be elected while his predecessor is alive, and Mesrob II's case was the first

instance that left the Armenian community puzzled on how to proceed with replacing a living religious leader. Archbishop Aram Ateşyan, who contested with Maşalyan in recent patriarch elections, was appointed to serve as the Patriarchal Vicar in 2008 as the 84th patriarch had to withdraw from his duties. What followed was a decadelong dispute between groups backing different figures in the community, which was further complicated by bureaucratic and clerical obstacles. With Mesrob II's death on March 8, a popular election process held since 1863 was officiated by the patriarchate. A recent code of conduct prepared by the Ministry of Interior excluding candidates from out of the episcopal class of the Armenian Patriarchate in Istanbul also raised controversy with some groups calling for a boycott, but the patriarchate decided to move forward with the elections.

On Dec. 8, some 13,807 people headed to the polls in six provinces and 37 electoral districts to elect members of the Assembly of the Delegates, a body that consisted of 20 clergymen and 120 civilians, a day after clergymen elected their own delegates. The committee that presided over the elections announced that the participation rate was satisfactory and it was close to 15,807 in 1998 despite a population decrease over a number of reasons, calls for boycott and voters backing out from polls over long queues in some districts. The "Orange" list backing Maşalyan received 9,008 votes, while the "Purple" list backing Ateşyan got 3,529, while 1,129 votes were blank or invalid. The Assembly of the Delegates then convened on Dec. 11 to elect the new patriarch, and Maşalyan, who was already elected as the deghabagh (locum tenens) by the Clerical Committee on July 4, was backed by 102 delegates.

"Calls for boycott did not gain ground. No one in this congregation would want to vote for a patriarch without approval from the state. Because we have lots of work to do, and they are all problems that will be solved with authorities," Maşalyan said.

The patriarch said that administrative issues that lasted for 12 years cost the community a period in which minorities benefited from reverse discrimination the most in the Republican era.

"We have lots of projects regarding our youth, children, schools, culture, religion and language but we need to establish human resources and financing legs for these. To realize this, we need to establish a body over different foundations, and for this, we need to set up a Central Administrative Delegation approved by the state. Our most basic problem is enfranchising the right to rule ourselves with necessary laws and regulations," Maşalyan said, saying that they expect the state to recognize the fact that like all minorities, the Armenian community faces extinction over low birth rates and mixed marriages.

The patriarch added that he will meet with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan next week.

Born in Istanbul's Bayrampaşa district in 1962, Maşalyan began his studies in 1979 at Istanbul Technical University's (ITU) Electronics and Communications Engineering Department but dropped out after deciding to become a priest in 1982. He then received a philosophy degree from Istanbul University. After becoming a high priest (vertaped) in 1984, he was then promoted to deacon (sargavak) in 1986 by then-Patriarch Şnork Kalutsyan. Maşalyan served as the deputy diocese priest in the Armenian Church of London in 1994 and later received theological training in Jerusalem for three years. After receiving a master's degree in spirituality in 1999 from Milltown Institute of Philosophy and Theology in Dublin, Maşalyan returned to Turkey and began serving as a preacher and spiritual counselor in Istanbul's Kınalıada, Kumkapı Dışı Surp Harutyun, Gedikpaşa and Galata churches until 2005, becoming deputy chairman of the Spiritual Council. He then

served as a faculty member, vice dean and dean of the Kevorkian Theology Academy in Armenia. Maşalyan returned to Istanbul in 2011 and became the Patriarchate's inter-church and interfaith relations responsible. The patriarch knows Turkish, Armenian and English, as well as Greek, Latin and Hebrew languages he studied as part of his theological education.

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