THE ARMENIAN PATRIARCHATE OF ISTANBUL HAVE MADE THE CORRECT OBSERVATIONS WITH REGARD TO THE ARMENIAN ISSUE

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Archbishop Aram Ateşyan, General Vicar of Armenian Patriarchate in Turkey, following the German Federal Assemblys resolution that presented the 1915 events on the basis of the genocide narrative, wrote a letter addressed to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.[1] Ateshian, in his letter, expressed that the decision by the German Federal Assembly *caused a deep regret in the Armenian nation*.[2] Ateshian further stated that the *There will come a day when the two peoples will cleanse poisonous plants in their fields and plant wheat in purified fields. And they will not content themselves with this; they will dip the bread made from the wheat of these fields into salt and share it as a sign of love and friendship.*

Aram Ateshians letter to President Erdoğan drew the negative reaction of the newspaper Agos. In response, Agos newspaper wrote a letter addressed to Ateshian. Agos, indicating that they have read Ateshians letter with anger and shame, stated the following:

> *You said, We, as the Patriarchate, will continue to pray for the fellowship of Turkey and Armenia; how could you justify this statement of yours, given the fact that your addressee President Erdoğan threatened the citizens of Armenia to send them back to Armenia two days ago? Doesn't it trouble your conscience? Let us remind you those statements of the president, in case you have forgotten: Currently, there are almost 100.000 Armenians in my country. Almost half of them are Turkish citizens. However, the other half are citizens of Armenia and we can send them back to Armenia, like Europe did."* ***[3]***

The English version of Agos letter to Ateshian contains an incomplete quote from President Erdoğans statement. The relevant part from President Erdoğans statement is as follow:

> *There are about 100,000 Armenians in my country. Almost half of them are our citizens. They live in our country now, and they work here. But there are as many Armenians who live in Turkey who are not our citizens. If we did not have sensitivity about this point, why should we keep Armenians who are not our citizens in our country? Just as Europeans are doing now, we can send them to Armenia. We can do that.*

As it can be remembered, Aram Ateshian, was appointed as General Vicar without the

holding of any election to fill in for Patriarch Mesrob II, who has been unable to perform his duty due to his illness. With the revelation of these letters, the Thought Platform (*tr.* Düşünce Platformu), which was established by Armenians in Turkey, organizing a protest before the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul, declared that they wanted to elect their own patriarch. However, the issue of whether a new patriarch could be elected while Patriarch Mesrob II is still alive is an ongoing matter of debate among the Armenian community in Turkey.

As stated in Ateshians letter, President Erdoğan, in a message of condolence addressed to the Armenians, had indicated that *the memories of the Ottoman Armenians will continue to be embraced in accordance with a sense of history and humanistic vision, and that the nearly millennium-old culture of cohabitation between Turks and Armenians will continue to be reminded.* Agos also has misinterpreted President Erdoğans statement with regards to non-citizen Armenians. Firstly, President Erdoğan embraced Armenians who are Turkish citizens and regarded them as part of Turkey. Secondly, drawing attention to the sensitivity of Turkish-Armenian relations, he pointed out that Armenians who are not Turkish citizens are allowed to stay in Turkey (yet, the current refugee crisis has shown that European countries, which pride themselves on defending human rights, mostly regard refugees that escaped the chaos of the Middle East almost as pests). Despite the fact that President Erdoğans statements do not harbor any anger or hostility towards Armenians, a portion of the Armenian community in Turkey reacted to Ateshians letter expressing regret in a disproportionate manner that bordered on lynching.

Ateshians letter also drew reactions in Armenia. Vahram Melikyan, the Director of Holy Echmiadzin's Information Department, making a statement to the Armenian press, announced that Aram Ateshian would not attend the ceremony that was recently organized on the occasion of the visit of Pope Francis, the spiritual leader of the Roman Catholic Church.[4] In response to Ateshians letter, critical articles were penned by columnists, and the issue was discussed in television programs. On June 20, a signature campaign was initiated by 30 members of Armenias parliament against the attendance of Archbishop Aram Ateshian to the abovementioned ceremony. The MPs that initiated this campaign issued the following statement: *If Ateshian has any honor, he shouldnt come. It would be best if he continues doing commerce. The people know that he is doing commerce. We are all aware of this.***[5]** On the other hand, the public reacting through social media accounts stated that they would throw eggs at Ateshian if he came to Armenia during Pope Franciss visit.[6]

As a result of the smear campaign spearheaded in Turkey by Agos, Ateshian was unable to attend the ceremony in Armenia on the occasion of Pope Francis visit. This disproportionate reaction and lynching process led by Agos deprived Ateshian, as the representative of the Armenian community in Turkey, of attending a highly important event for Armenians. The fact that Agos, the newspaper of the late Hrant Dink who was a journalist of Armenian descent, ran a smear campaign against another Armenian, who is, not to mention, the General Vicar, is thought-provoking.

Turks and Armenians putting their prejudices and hostilities aside and coming together to build a common future would be a favorable development for everyone. Furthermore, the

establishment of official relations between Turkey and Armenia, free of the negative effects of countries that abuse the 1915 events in accordance with their interests, would similarly be a favorable development. Perhaps Ateshian wrote the said letter to President Erdoğan with such a view. It is apparent that Ateshian has been bothered by the straining of Turkish-Armenian relations as a result of comments and accusations made by malevolent third parties on controversial matters. There is no part in Ateshians letter insinuating that he compromised on his Armenian identity. Even though Agos tries reflect itself as a tolerant media organ, its recent campaign proved that Agos has an ideologue and stigmatizing mindset. With its accusations and marginalization against Ateshian that are riddled with assumptions, Agos has revealed its negative and nonconstructive mentality.

[1] "Ateşyan'dan Cumhurbaşkanı'na mektup: Üzüntümüzü Yüksek Makamınıza arz ederiz", *Agos*, 07.06.2016, http://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/15576/atesyan-dan-cumhurbaskani-na-mektup-uzuntumuzu-yuksek-makaminiza-arz-ederiz

[2] "Almanya Parlamentosu 'Soykırım Tasarısını Onayladı", *BBC Türkçe*, 02.06.2016, http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2016/06/160602_almanya_soykirim_oylama

[3] Letter to Ateşyan from Agos: May God bestow sense, intelligence and comprehension on you, Agos, 07.06.2016, http://www.agos.com.tr/en/article/15581/letter-to-atesyan-from-agos-may-god-bestow-sense-intelligence-and-comprehension-on-you

[4] "Ateşyan'ın Erivan ziyareti iptal", *Haber10*, 24.06.2016, http://www.wanhaber.com/atesyanin-erivan-ziyareti-iptal-208826h.htm

[5] "Aram Ateşyan'ın Ermenistan ziyareti iptal oldu!", *Çağdaş Ses*, 23.06.2016, http://www.cagdasses.com/guncel/44950/aram-atesyanin-ermenistan-ziyareti-iptal-oldu

[6] "Aram Ateşyan Ermenistana gelmeyecek", ErmeniHaber.am, 22.06.2016, http://www.ermenihaber.am/tr/news/2016/06/22/Aram-Ate%C5%9Fyan-Ermenistan/85359

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