

# Reflections on the Flawed Historiography Of President Barack Obama

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By Jacob Thomas

When I reflect upon the history of the Turkish Republic, and its predecessor, the Ottoman Empire, my emotions come strongly into play. I experienced on a personal level great loss and displacement. Let me explain. I am a Levantine Christian whose ancestors lived under Ottoman Turkish rule for 400 years. My father was conscripted into the Turkish Army and served as a clerk at an army headquarters in Cilicia, Asia Minor, during the First World War. His brother, my Uncle John, wasn't that fortunate in his conscripted service for he was sent, along with many other fellow-Levantines, to serve in the Sinai front facing the British forces on the east side of the Suez Canal. Weak and exhausted at war's end he returned home only to succumb shortly thereafter to a typhus epidemic that swept through the family's hometown, Seleucia. His wife also died leaving their two children orphans. Two other uncles had already fled the Levant before the outbreak of the war, and thus were spared the deprivations that befell the entire population of the Levant between 1914 and 1918.

The end of WWI saw the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, and the emergence of new states in the Middle East. The British gained control over the southern Levant, Palestine and Transjordan; and the French administered Syria and Lebanon, with a "Mandate" from the League of Nations.

When I was just a child our family moved from Seleucia, to Alexandretta, Syria. This city was the most modern and diverse part of Syria. The largest gulf in the Mediterranean lay just offshore of Alexandretta. The brilliant military man Mustapha Kemal Atatürk knew its strategic importance and coveted it for the new Turkish state he helped to create, and of which he was President for 15 years until his death in 1938. Shortly before he died, his dream was realized when Ataturk's Turkish forces invaded our province in 1938 with the connivance of the French Mandatory Power. By June 1939, around 90,000 citizens of the province, mostly Arabic-speaking Christians and remnants of the *Armenian Genocide*, were driven once again to seek refuge elsewhere. Many settled in the other provinces of Syria, while some moved to Lebanon and to other parts of the Middle East.

With even this short outline of some of the memories that are still vivid in my recollection, the reader can understand my strong emotional attachment to the tragic history of the changing contours of the Levant I knew. Thus when the President of my adopted country lately visited Turkey I was attentive to what he would convey to the Turkish people and leaders. President Barack Obama's speech before the National Assembly in Ankara on Monday, the 6<sup>th</sup> of April, 2009 was stunning in its historical inaccuracies and naïve assumptions. As I read the text of the speech, I found myself muttering under my breath, '**this isn't so**' or '**it was just the other way!**'

Of course I realize that kings, presidents, and prime ministers have to be very diplomatic when addressing the official representatives of foreign countries. By diplomatic, I mean they must be polite, respectful, and aim at leaving good impressions with the host country. But that doesn't require the twisting of historical facts. President Obama's speech had too many flawed statements that ignored or covered up certain deep wounds that had been inflicted on many nations and ethnic groups during the long, long history of the Ottoman Empire (1453-1918), as well as in the relatively recent history of the Turkish Republic.

I am not so naïve as to conclude that Mr. Obama wrote that speech himself! It is difficult to know just who had a hand in it but it seems likely the State Department staff was heavily involved. Still, the speech in Ankara left much to be desired in the "historical facts" department.

Mr. Obama has a degree from Harvard University. While he was studying there, Samuel P. Huntington (1927-2008) taught political science. This famous scholar authored the widely read and highly regarded book "**The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order.**" Professor Huntington never tired of reminding his readers that "*The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilisation whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power*" P. 217 \* We can only hope that if he didn't read Huntington while at Harvard, President Obama has done so by now. In particular, he would do well to remember this particular thesis of Professor Huntington.

Let's now look more critically at the President's Ankara speech to get a view toward understanding his way of looking at the Turkish situation and its relationship to the broader historiography of the Middle East.

*"This morning I had the privilege of visiting the tomb of the great founder of your Republic. I was deeply impressed by this beautiful memorial to a man who did so much to shape the course of history. But it is also clear that the greatest monument to Atatürk's life is not something that can be cast in stone and marble. His greatest legacy is Turkey's strong and secular democracy, and that is the work that this assembly carries on today."*

Mustapha Kemal Atatürk was indeed a great Turkish hero which explains why he earned the title of "**Ata Turk**" i.e. **Father of the Turks**. He abolished the **Caliphate** in 1924, and replaced it with a republican regime. He spearheaded a tremendous effort to break with the past by forcing on his countrymen a process of secularization that went to such lengths that men and women were required to adopt European-style clothing. The Arabic script that had been in use for half a millennium was replaced by a Latin-based script that enormously facilitated the spread of literacy among all sections of Turkish society.

But we should not be so naïve as to suppose that it is accurate to credit him with having created "**a strong and secular democracy.**" It is true that he did champion a thorough form of secularism, but he did not believe or practice democracy. Until his death in 1938,

Turkey had only one political party, *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, i.e. the *People's Republican Party*. (Note: In modern Turkish, the letter "C" stands for "J") He continued to hold the office of the presidency throughout his entire lifetime. Most of his reforms were forced on the people, such as the prohibition of the use of Arabic in the *Call to Prayer*, and the *pilgrimage to Mecca*; but those reforms did not last very long!

It is extremely difficult today to sustain the theory that Turkey is still committed to the *Ataurkian* concept of a secular society. Both the Prime Minister [Recep Tayyip Erdoğan](#) and President *Abdullah Gul* belong to the *Islamic Justice and Development Party*. They are boldly and steadily reshaping Turkish society by directing it back to Islam, regardless of the strong opposition of the secularists and the Turkish Army General Staff.

Building on the theory that Turkey is a democracy, Mr. Obama continued,

***“Turkey’s democracy is your own achievement. It was not forced upon you by any outside power, nor did it come without struggle and sacrifice. Like any democracy, Turkey draws strength from both the successes of the past, and from the efforts of each generation of Turks that makes new progress for your people.”***

I don't deny that Turkey observes many rules of the democratic game, at least since the beginning of the two-party system in the 1950s. However, its genre of democracy benefits only the Turkish majority, but exhibits no genuine respect for the rights of non-Turkish ethnic groups living within Turkey. Still, Mr. Obama continued his panegyric of the democratic achievements by telling the deputies in Ankara,

***“In the last several years, you have abolished state-security courts and expanded the right to counsel. You have reformed the penal code, and strengthened laws that govern the freedom of the press and assembly. You lifted bans on teaching and broadcasting Kurdish, and the world noted with respect the important signal sent through a new state Kurdish television station.***

***“These achievements have created new laws that must be implemented, and a momentum that should be sustained. For democracies cannot be static – they must move forward. Freedom of religion and expression lead to a strong and vibrant civil society that only strengthens the state, which is why steps like reopening the Halki Seminary, will send such an important signal inside Turkey and beyond.***

***“We have already seen historic and courageous steps taken by Turkish and Armenian leaders. These contacts hold out the promise of a new day. An open border would return the Turkish and Armenian people to a peaceful and prosperous coexistence that would serve both of your nations. That is why the United States strongly supports the full normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia.”***

President Obama listed those great achievements of the Turkish government in creating genuine democratic changes in the country, such as allowing Kurdish to be used on state television. But there is no hint about relaxing the restrictions imposed on the Orthodox

Church, as its Halki Seminary has been in governmental forced closure for a long time. That hostile act of closing the Seminary has prevented the *Ecumenical Patriarchate of the Orthodox Church*, with its seat in Istanbul (formerly Constantinople), from training its clergy. Neither the former secularist regime in Turkey, nor the Islamic-leaning one at present, have exhibited any willingness to reopen the Halki Seminary. To do so would give the appearance of helping strengthen the Christian faith, which few, if any, in leadership are willing to do. The plea of Mr. Obama fell on deaf ears. The Turkish authorities thus far in their history have not been willing to change their harsh attitude towards any religion other than Islam. Turkishness and Islam are two sides of the same coin and followers of the Christian religion suffer accordingly.

The problem with the Orthodox Church is a minor one when compared with the unresolved and thorny question of the *Armenian Genocide* that took place in the Turkish mainland during WWI. President Obama had to tread carefully when dealing with this subject, so he began with this sermonet addressing the deputies:

***“Human endeavor is by its nature imperfect. History, unresolved, can be a heavy weight. Each country must work through its past. And reckoning with the past can help us seize a better future. I know there are strong views in this chamber about the terrible events of 1915. While there has been a good deal of commentary about my views, this is really about how the Turkish and Armenian people deal with the past. And the best way forward for the Turkish and Armenian people is a process that works through the past in a way that is honest, open and constructive.”***

The President of the United States is to be given credit for broaching this difficult subject. He didn't lecture his hosts but gently reminded them that there is an issue between Turks and Armenians that has not been solved and the parties should work together to resolve their conflict. The facts are undisputed. Over one million Armenians perished during WWI, due to the deliberate policies and actions of the Turkish authorities. The question remains, why does Turkey refuse to acknowledge that a people living within the Ottoman Empire were forcefully eliminated? There were foreign witnesses, both Germans and Americans, who testified to the nature and extent of the killings that took the lives of a very large number of Armenian Christians.

***“Let me be clear: the United States strongly supports Turkey's bid to become a member of the European Union. We speak not as members of the EU, but as close friends of Turkey and Europe. Turkey has been a resolute ally and a responsible partner in transatlantic and European institutions. And Turkey is bound to Europe by more than bridges over the Bosphorous. Centuries of shared history, culture, and commerce bring you together. Europe gains by diversity of ethnicity, tradition and faith – it is not diminished by it. And Turkish membership would broaden and strengthen Europe's foundation once more.”***

By bringing up Turkey's hopes for entry into the EU immediately after mention of the Armenian question, Mr. Obama perhaps meant to help further his desires for resolution of the Armenian conflict by showing how committed the United States is Turkey becoming

a member of the EU. While the deputies listening to him may have appreciated his sentiments, they know that the United States cannot tell the Europeans what to do about this delicate subject.

President Obama put a positive interpretation on the history of European relations with Turkey with words like these:

***“And Turkey is bound to Europe by more than bridges over the Bosphorous. Centuries of shared history, culture, and commerce bring you together. Europe gains by diversity of ethnicity, tradition and faith – it is not diminished by it.”***

But it is yet to be determined what Europe would gain if Turkey joined the EU. Has Western Europe forgotten the centuries of Ottoman domination of the Balkans and of central Europe and all it entailed? How fresh in the memory of Europeans is the remembrance of the *Devshirme, that evil Ottoman institution that took thousands of Christian boys from their families, brought them up as Muslims* and enrolled them in the elite army corps of the Janissaries! That barbaric institution lasted for too long and left deep scars on the people of the Balkans. Are Europeans losing their awareness of the difference between the Islamic and Europeans cultures? They seem to be acquiescing in the takeover of many of their cities by immigrants from Muslim countries who either refuse or find it difficult to accommodate themselves to their host countries’ cultures. The President seemed to forget these sorts of issues when claiming that Europe and Turkey have a “shared history.”

Therefore, whether ***“Europe gains by diversity of ethnicity, tradition and faith,”*** depends on whether the diversity of ethnicity and traditions are in harmony with European traditions. To date, the Muslim immigrants in Western Europe have not easily or willingly assimilated into European societies. One has only to remember the car burnings that happened more than once recently in Paris, Lyon, and Marseilles, and in other parts of Europe to see the difficulties on the horizon. President Obama’s words do not evidence a clear understanding of what it will take to confront these realities in European cities and deal with them.

***“We will listen carefully, bridge misunderstanding, and seek common ground. We will be respectful, even when we do not agree. And we will convey our deep appreciation for the Islamic faith, which has done so much over so many centuries to shape the world for the better – including my own country. The United States has been enriched by Muslim Americans. Many other Americans have Muslims in their family, or have lived in a Muslim-majority country – I know, because I am one of them.”***

***“Above all, we will demonstrate through actions our commitment to a better future. We want to help more children get the education that they need to succeed. We want to promote health care in places where people are vulnerable. We want to expand the trade and investment that can bring prosperity for all people. In the months ahead, I will present specific programs to advance these goals. Our focus will be on what we can do, in partnership with people across the Muslim world, to advance our common***

***hopes, and our common dreams. And when people look back on this time, let it be said of America that we extended the hand of friendship.”***

When President Obama reached his finale he waxed very eloquent, but was he aware that, officially at least, he was addressing parliamentarians of a secular republic? The Atatürk he praised at the beginning of his address founded a political regime totally divorced from Islam. As mentioned before, he had the boldness, nay, the audacity to abolish an Islamic Caliphate that began in 632 A.D. So why did Mr. Obama praise Islam within the halls of a supposedly secular institution? Was he acknowledging the inevitability of Turkey’s turning back on the ideals of the founder of the republic, and returning to the fold of the Islamic Umma?

And what did he mean by stating ***“we will convey our deep appreciation for the Islamic faith, which has done so much over so many centuries to shape the world for the better – including my own country. The United States has been enriched by Muslim Americans.”*** At the risk of sounding Islamophobic, I would like to know what the Islamic faith has done to shape the world for the better. Islam has been an imperialistic religion from its beginnings to the present day. Unlike all other world faiths, it spread militarily through its *futuhat*, or conquests. Was President Obama aware that Muslims are proud of the Ottoman Sultan who conquered Constantinople and wrested it from the Christians? They call him ***Muhammad al-Fateh***, i.e., the Conqueror? And unlike all other empires that eventually left their former colonies, most of the territories conquered by Islam have remained within its grip to this very day.

President Obama ended up addressing the deputies not so much as Turks, but as Muslims; and through them he sent a message to the entire Islamic world. Three days later, Daniel Henninger of The Wall Street Journal, commented on the following part of Obama’s speech.

***“We seek broader engagement based on mutual interest and mutual respect. We will listen carefully, we will bridge misunderstandings, and we will seek common ground. We will be respectful, even when we do not agree. We will convey our deep appreciation for the Islamic faith. . . .”***

Mr. Henninger responded to the above remarks of Mr. Obama:

**“This is an eloquent description of ecumenical civility. In reality, the experience of Arab Christians living now amid majority Islamic populations is often repression, arrest, imprisonment and death.**

**“Coptic Christians in Egypt have been singled out for discrimination and persecution. Muslim rioters often burn or vandalize their churches and shops.**

**“In Turkey, the Syriac Orthodox Church (its 3,000 members speak Aramaic, the language of Christ) is battling with Turkish authorities over the lands around the Mar Gabriel monastery, built in 397.**

**“In 1995, the Saudis were allowed to build a mosque in Rome near the Vatican, but never reciprocated with a Christian church in their country. Saudi Arabia even forbids private worship at home for some one million Christian migrant workers.**

**“In Iraq, the situation for small religious minorities has become dire. Reports emerge regularly of mortal danger there for groups that date to antiquity — Chaldean-Assyrians, the Yazidis and Sabeian Mandaeans, who revere John the Baptist. Last fall the Chaldean-Assyrian archbishop of Mosul was kidnapped and murdered. “In short, the “respect” Mr. Obama promised to give Islam is going only in one direction. And he knows that.**

**“If Islam won’t let its leaders give basic rights to a handful of ancient Christians, there is no hope for what Mr. Obama proposed this week in Turkey. What his special envoy for Middle East peace, George Mitchell, wishes to achieve with Israel and its neighbors will also fail, again.”**

Having expressed my personal reflections on President Obama’s speech in Ankara; and the comments of a seasoned American journalist, it is only fitting to end my article by way of excerpts from an op-ed by a well-known Arab columnist. He contributed his hard-hitting commentary on Mr. Obama’s speech on 13 April, 2009; it was published in the daily online, *Elaph*, under the title, **“Has America Ever Been at War with the Islamic World?!!”** □□□□□□□□ □□□□□□ □□□ □□□ □□ □□□□□□ □□□□ □□!!

***“President Obama’s speech in Turkey in which he expressed his appreciation for Islam, and friendship with the Islamic world, evoked several commentaries by Arab and Muslim columnists. Some claimed that the American administrations that preceded Obama were in a state of war with the Islamic world; and that the new president was intent on pursuing a radical change in that policy.***

***“In fact, America has never waged war against Islam during the previous Democratic and Republican administrations. It would be totally inaccurate to imply that the new American administration is now adopting a new course vis-à-vis Islam and the Islamic world.***

***“What are the real facts about this subject?***

***“Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, Islamic terrorism has been striking one blow after another against the United States, with the number of the casualties on 11 September, 2001 alone reached 3,000 victims. Let me go back to the attack on the Marines in Beirut during the early 1980s, the bombing of the destroyer USS Cole in Gulf of Aden, the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993, and many other terrorist attacks. They were all perpetrated by Muslims in the name of the Qur’an and of Islam. Thus, it is accurate to describe those acts as Islamic Irhab. This terrorism targeted Western countries and not America only. So we may point to the bombings in London and Madrid. Not content with those kinds of attacks, Islamic radicalism is***

*working hard at curtailing the freedom of expression and of the press in the West; not to forget the riots and assassinations that have occurred in Europe in recent history.*

*“It is absolutely false to claim that the Bush administration equated Islam with terrorism after the attacks on September, 2001? On the contrary, it did its utmost to explain to the American public the importance of differentiating between Islam and the majority of Muslims on the one hand, and those who advocate a radical ideology under the guise of Islam.*

*“Hatred of America in the Islamic world has been deeply entrenched long before President Bush’s administration. It had existed during the tenure of several previous U. S. presidents, and will go on ad infinitum. It was the root for demonizing Mr. Bush and his policies; as for the ‘honeymoon’ with Obama, let’s wait and see how long it will last!”*

\* Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

The URL for President Obama’s speech in Ankara is:

<http://bostonuniversity.blogspot.com/2009/04/obama-in-ankara-full-text-of-his-speech.html>

The URL for Mr. Henninger’s article is:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123923457420703137.html>