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Movie on Armenians Rekindles Flame Over Turkish Past

By STEPHEN KINZER

ISTANBUL — Turks are among the world's proudest and most patriotic people, and many feel an especially deep admiration for their army, without which the nation might never have emerged from the wreckage of the Ottoman Empire more than 80 years ago. But are they ready to see a film in which Ottoman Turkish soldiers shoot defenseless civilians and burn women alive? That question has set off a bitter debate here.

The film is "[Ararat](#)," a 2002 release by the Armenian-Canadian director Atom Egoyan in which the expulsion of Armenians from what is now eastern Turkey in 1915 is depicted in scenes of horrific brutality. Although the film would certainly shock and outrage many Turks, the government has approved it for screening.

"Those who want to see the film can go," said the minister of culture and tourism, Erkan Mumcu. He said showing it would "prove that Turkey is a democratic country."

This was a remarkable step in a country where open discussion of the 1915 massacres has long been taboo. Turkey is loosening many restrictions on free speech as part of a reform project aimed in part at persuading the European Union to look favorably on its application for membership.

After Mr. Mumcu's decision to allow "Ararat" to be shown, however, an extreme nationalist group earlier this month threatened to attack any movie house where it was shown. That led the distributor to "indefinitely postpone" plans to release the film in Turkey.

"Would you want to watch a movie in a theater that could be stoned or where there could be violence?" asked the distributor, Sabahattin Cetin. The group that made the disruptive threats is the youth wing of the Nationalist Action Party, which was part of the government until it was voted out of power in the November 2002 election. "I dare them to show it," the group's president, Alisan Satilmis, said in a television interview.

Devlet Bahceli, the Nationalist Action leader, who until 2002 was Turkey's deputy prime minister, said he agreed with his youth group. "It would be in our interest to investigate why a film that is against the Turkish nation has been imported into Turkey," he said.

This view appears out of step with the intensifying desire of many Turks for broader democratic freedoms. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his government are arguably more committed to full democracy than any government in Turkish history. Nationalist forces fear that Mr. Erdogan is preparing to make a historic deal to end the

long dispute over Cyprus, and they may be forcing a confrontation over "Ararat" in an effort to portray him as unpatriotic.

Even some Turkish commentators who pride themselves on their nationalist convictions have urged that "Ararat" be shown here.

"Every Turk should see this film," one of them, Omer Lutfi Mete, wrote in the mass-circulation daily Sabah. "Otherwise how can we respond to their accusations?"

Another Turkish commentator, Etyen Mahcupyan, who is of Armenian descent, said the Nationalist Action Party, known here as M.H.P., was using this controversy to regain its lost visibility.

"`Ararat' was a very good opportunity for them," Mr. Mahcupyan said. "They are on TV again, waving the nationalist flag. Trying to prevent the film from being shown is mainly a tactic of M.H.P., but we also know that they are in coalition with other forces, like the nationalist left and the deep bureaucracy. Their timing was good because they sensed that the government was not strong enough to resist on this issue."

Turkish and Armenian historians have given widely differing accounts of what happened in 1915. They agree that Armenians were chased from their ancestral homeland in eastern Anatolia, and that hundreds of thousands perished. Armenians say this action was planned and organized by the Ottoman government. Some Turks, however, insist that Armenians, backed by czarist Russia, were rebelling against Ottoman rule, and that what they call "the events" of 1915 were tragic but must be seen against the background of World War I and the crumbling Ottoman Empire.

A few years after the massacre of Armenians, Turkish rebels led by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk overthrew the Ottoman government and in 1923 established the present-day Republic of Turkey. Generations of Turkish leaders have refused to condemn Ottoman officials like Talat Pasha, who was instrumental in organizing the expulsion of Armenians.

Mr. Egoyan showed "Ararat" at the Cannes International Film Festival in 2002, and it has attracted considerable attention since. The film, whose cast includes Christopher Plummer, Eric Bogosian and Charles Aznavour, has been shown in more than two dozen countries and won several awards. Reviews were mixed, but many critics praised it for raising difficult issues.

"`Ararat' clearly comes from Mr. Egoyan's heart, and it conveys a message he urgently wants to be heard: that the world should acknowledge and be shamed that a great crime was committed against his people," Roger Ebert wrote in The Chicago Sun-Times. "The message I receive from the movie, however, is a different one: that it is difficult to know the truth of historical events, and that all reports depend on the point of view of the witness and the state of mind of those who listen to the witness."

Mr. Egoyan said in an interview that he had ancestors who were killed in eastern Anatolia during the trauma that shattered their community in the second decade of the 20th century. He compared his film to Steven Spielberg's Holocaust drama, "[Schindler's List](#)," which he said relied on "historical contrivances, some very troubling, that were used to dramatic effect but were not accurate ways of transcribing what actually occurred."

"Films are by nature a very dubious way of presenting history," Mr. Egoyan said. "I'm very uneasy with what occurs when you combine notions of atrocity and glamour. Every decision to light a character in a certain way, to add a certain sound effect, to put in musical cue, makes a film interpretive. There's no way that any dramatic reconstruction is not going to be in some way a retelling. That's the nature of storytelling.

"But the very event this film refers to is something that is not accepted as a historical reality by the state of Turkey, despite the fact that every serious scholar of genocide has affirmed it. Many people there will see this whole thing as a fabrication. That's the fundamentally absurd aspect of the situation we're in."

One of the few Turkish intellectuals who have seen "Ararat" is the columnist and journalism professor Haluk Sahin, who saw it during a visit to Boston a year ago. He said he found it "confusing and confused, incoherent, overly artistic but cold, not free of hatred and devoid of compassion." But he said it was significant that the Turkish government favored showing it here.

"This is perhaps the first time a government of Turkey is trying to release a controversial anti-Turkish film while others are trying to stop it," Mr. Sahin said. "It's a real role reversal. In the old days the government would have a film banned, and sometimes the companies would be able to have it freed through appeals to courts, and people would flock to see it. Now the minister of culture is saying Turkey is mature enough to tolerate a film of this sort regardless of its anti-Turkish content, while the ultranationalists are issuing threats against its showing. Nothing like this has ever happened before."

This is not the first time Turks have felt slandered by a popular film. In the late 1970's many were outraged by "[Midnight Express](#)," the story of a young American drug smuggler who was jailed in Turkey. The script, by Oliver Stone, portrayed Turks as irredeemably brutal.

In agreeing to allow "Ararat" to be shown here, Mr. Mumcu, the culture minister, recalled the controversy over "Midnight Express." He said Turks drew attention to that film by their emotional attacks on it.

"We will not let Turkey experience another 'Midnight Express,' " he said. "Strong reaction to this movie would only help keep the subject on the agenda."