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Speech for Armenian Genocide Centennial Commemoration in Istanbul
April 24, 2015

We are here today to mark the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, one of humanity's darkest events. But for Armenians all over the world, it is also a time when we celebrate our survival, and our enormous resilience.

I am here today because one hundred years ago my great-grandmother climbed a mountain. She was living in Khidir Beg village, on Musa Dagi, overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. The Ottoman army had forcefully conscripted her husband, never to return. Soon after, when the state issued a deportation order for the village, the people of Khidir Beg held a meeting to decide how to respond. Some of the villagers chose to obey the order and went on what turned out to be a death march that few survived.

But my great-grandmother Varter, a young mother of three, and a few other stubborn villagers defied the order. They scaled their mountain, and for forty days the Armenians of Musa Dagi fought off the Ottoman Army until their supplies ran out and a passing allied battleship miraculously rescued them.

Wherever the Armenian survivors like my ancestors went, in each refugee camp, in every town, from Beirut to California, they recreated their village. They planted mulberry trees, pomegranate trees, and grape vines, gathering in their shade.

And that is why I am here today: To honor those who were killed, those who resisted, and those who survived. I stand proudly with you here today to speak my great-grandparents' names, Sarkis Zeitlian and Varter Kojanian, in Armenian, our beautiful language that survives against all odds. I speak their names in the heart of this great city: a city where Armenians thought, wrote, created, and lived for centuries before the Genocide; a city where now a small but dignified and vibrant Armenian community continues to teach its children our language and our traditions.

As I speak Armenian in the heart of Istanbul on this hallowed day, I can hear the sounds of the past. If you listen carefully, the past is not silent. It is as clear as the ringing of a church bell on a Sunday morning.

There are Armenian churches all over this beautiful country. Some of them are now in ruins, some of them are mosques, sports clubs, stables, and barns. Yet they maintain their dignity, and they astonish us with their beauty. They, too, are survivors. They could never be museum exhibitions.

For if you listen carefully you can hear the distant echo of their bells. When the bells ring at the 1001 Churches of Ani, the capital of our ancient kings, all the other

churches respond: from my ancestors' little village church, to the Church of the Holy Cross on Aghtamar, to Surp Giragos reborn in Diyarbekir. And the voices of our ancestors can be heard from the mountains of Sasun, to the plains of Mush, amidst the pine trees of Zeytun, and even above the burning sands of Der Zor.

They are calling for justice. We are calling for justice. We are here today with Armenians from around the world and citizens of many nationalities who have traveled to stand against denial. We are here today with citizens of Turkey who are standing with us in our quest for redress and restitution.

I am here today with my children, Arda Zabel and Aram David, because I want them to embrace the land of their ancestors. I want for them a world in which we can stand together with dignity, equality and justice for all the people of this land, and for all people around the world.

Friends, let's begin again, and like my great-grandmother, let's climb our mountain together. Let us hear the bells ringing, urging us on. Let us work together for justice.