

## A Bystander to Genocide?

An interview with genocide scholar Gregory Stanton

by Chris Zakian

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Dr. Gregory Stanton is the president of the International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS). The *Armenian Reporter* spoke to him by phone on August 23, to get his perspective on the developments concerning the national Anti-Defamation League's stance on the Armenian Genocide and the importance of acknowledging the Genocide, both in Congress and as a matter of historical fact.

**Armenian Reporter:** Were you aware of the Anti-Defamation League's position on the Armenian Genocide prior to the past two weeks?

**Gregory Stanton:** No, I wasn't – but that's only because I didn't look into it. I've supported and admired the work of the ADL for many years, and frankly this came as a surprise to me.

**AR:** The developments in this case have moved very quickly. What do you see as having set it all in motion?

**Stanton:** Ultimately, what precipitated the controversy was the ADL *actively opposing* the Congressional resolution. They didn't have to do that – they could have continued to be silent, if nothing else; and I don't know why they went about it the way they did.

**AR:** What might the reason have been?

**Stanton:** It's highly likely that the Turkish denial lobby influenced them to take the original position. Just as it's influenced the U.S. government, especially the State Department, to oppose the resolution. The refusal of the U.S. to acknowledge the Armenian Genocide is all based on a calculation of national self-interest that is shortsighted. And the same thing is true for Israel's position [on the genocide]. I agree that Israel has a need to get allies; but one should not get allies by refusing to tell the truth.

**AR:** Earlier this week the ADL retreated from its original position and issued a statement acknowledging the Armenian Genocide as such...

**Stanton:** People with conscience inside the ADL were uncomfortable enough with [the former] position that the New England chapter decided to oppose the national organization – and they should be commended for their courage.

**AR:** Why is important to use the word “genocide” to describe these mass crimes?

**Stanton:** Denial is the final stage of genocide – it's a *continuation* of genocide. I believe denial itself is part of the act of genocide. Now that we have a word to describe this

crime – and we did not have it at the time of the Armenian Genocide – but now that we do have it, it's important to use that word. The fact that the current government of Turkey continues to deny the genocide of the Armenians is frankly perplexing to me. It's not the current government that is implicated in the Genocide; it's the former Ottoman government of the Young Turks. The present government of Turkey should simply acknowledge the historic truth.

**AR:** A common refrain among those who oppose a Congressional resolution – and the ADL reiterated this point two days after their acknowledgment statement – is that questions about the genocide should be left up to Armenian and Turkish scholars. Is that a tenable position? Can one take a neutral stance on such questions? Are they matters just for Armenian and Turkish scholars?

**Stanton:** No, they're not. They're certainly not matters for Armenian and Turkish scholars *alone* to discuss. That's an absurd position – like saying only Jewish and German scholars should discuss the Holocaust. This is a matter of objective historical fact. And that's what we agreed at the International Association of Genocide Scholars. We *unanimously* concluded that this was a genocide. There was *no* dissent. All the scholars of any repute agree on this fact. And the few who don't are individuals in Turkey, who depend for their livelihood on supporting the political position of the government, and a few individuals elsewhere whose positions are funded by Turkish interests.

**AR:** In defense of its former position, the ADL intimated that it was taken up at the behest of Turkey's Jewish community – meaning that the ADL felt that the Jewish community was under threat in Turkey. Is that a sufficient rationale for the public stance taken by the ADL until this week?

**Stanton:** I don't believe this position is really tenable, because I don't believe that the government of Turkey is a threat to the Jewish population in Turkey. In fact, if you were to suggest that this was the case, the Turkish government would be outraged at the suggestion [that Jews live under threat in the country]. By analogy, you could say that we shouldn't talk about the Holocaust because Jews in Germany are living under threat. Certainly, sadly, there are neo-Nazi groups in the country who are a danger. But those groups are not the official government or the majority population; and *surely* the German government will protect its Jewish citizens from these fringe elements. But you can't let the existence of these neo-Nazi groups silence you on the larger matter.

**AR:** Do you think that, having now acknowledged the Armenian Genocide, the ADL is obliged to support the “Armenian Genocide resolution” in Congress? Incidentally, the ADL issued a statement [on August 23] reiterating its opposition to any Congressional action.

**Stanton:** In light of their – for want of a better term – “soft denial” of the genocide in previous statements, their current position needs to be different. Now they must clearly state that this *was* a genocide, and that the Congressional resolution *should* be approved.

If not that, if they can't do that, then at least they cannot continue to actively oppose it. It is simply a matter of ethical hygiene that people who are mistaken should *admit* that they were mistaken.

**AR:** The strongly-worded "Open Letter to the National Anti-Defamation League," which you issued on behalf of the International Association of Genocide Scholars, includes this sentence: "The fundamental principle in opposing genocide is refusing to limit one's universe of moral concern to one's own ethnic, religious, or national group." Could you elaborate on what you meant by that?

**Stanton:** The fundamental cause of genocide is ethnocentrism: when one group believes another group has no right to exist. The phenomenon of being a *bystander* to genocide is when one's area of concern doesn't extend beyond one's group, to encompass the entire human race. When you can say, Yes, there are people being killed in a genocide in Sudan – but it's none of our concern. The point is that it *is* of concern to us, because we're *all* members of the human race. That consciousness is what's so crucial in this ADL situation. The New England chapter *had* that consciousness. The national organization didn't – in essence, it excluded Armenians from the human race, in that sense.

**AR:** Why was there such a difference between the two levels of the same organization?

**Stanton:** I think the national organization is more concerned about international politics than about human rights, as the United States government has been on the issue of the Armenian Genocide. That's why it's so important that the Congressional resolution is passed: it will put the U.S. on record as affirming what it's always known to be the truth.

**AR:** And if the resolution *doesn't* pass? Would that be something on the level of the "final stage" of genocide?

**Stanton:** It'll be the continuation of a continuing injustice. And we'll continue to fight it.