

Turkey Must Acknowledge Its Past

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In the wake of the Turkish government's anger over the Anti-Defamation League's recent decision to acknowledge as genocide the extermination of more than a million Armenians in 1915, crucial issues concerning human rights, historical memory, and ethics have come to light.

Turkey's ambassador to Israel, Namik Tan, told The Jerusalem Post (Aug. 27) that Israel must force the ADL to retract its acknowledgement of the Armenian genocide, that failure to do this would be a stab in the heart of the Turkish people and that the Turkish people do not distinguish between Israeli Jews and Diaspora Jews on this issue. Tan also said that recognizing the Armenian genocide will mean that "my ancestors have done something inconceivable," and it will set off "a campaign against Turkey and the Turkish people." Though he subsequently tempered his language, this was a very harsh attack with overtones of classic views of Jewish power.

Turkey has told Israel and various Jewish organizations that if they favor a congressional resolution acknowledging the genocide it will not bode well for Israel's relationship with Turkey or for Turkish Jews. It is true that Turkey is the only Muslim nation willing to maintain a close diplomatic relationship with Israel and remains the only Muslim country that allows a small Jewish community to live in relative freedom. We know that Turkey is pressured by internal factions and by other Muslim nations to sever ties with Israel. And it is also clear how fragile and tenuous, despite seeming quite comfortable, Jewish life in Turkey is.

Nevertheless, it is equally crucial that historical denial of genocide be addressed in an uncompromising fashion. While historians are taught to be skeptical, it is absurd to be skeptical or neutral about events of the magnitude of the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust, which are attested to by reams of documents and material evidence as well as testimonies by victims, perpetrators and bystanders. Neutrality or skepticism in the case of these two tragedies constitutes denial, which is the final stage of genocide in that it seeks to demonize the victims and rehabilitate the perpetrators.

The broad and international record on the Armenian genocide has been created by an international body of dispassionate scholarship for decades, and notably, affirmed by The International Association of Genocide Scholars in repeated statements that note that this history is not controversial anywhere in the world but in Turkey. Raphael Lemkin, the noted legal scholar who lost 49 members of his family in the Holocaust, invented the concept of genocide, in part, on the basis of what happened to the Armenians in 1915.

The main actor here, however, is Turkey. It is time for Turkey to end its nine-decade campaign to erase the Armenian genocide. It is time to stop bullying and attempting to coerce states and organizations that engage history honestly. Such a campaign is immoral.

By passing the resolution (H.R. 106) before it, Congress must make it clear to Turkey that, even as we welcome its alliance with the United States in so many arenas, the time for this denial is over.

Turkey's calls for a commission of historians to resolve this issue are disingenuous, especially for a country that has a law that makes it a crime to "insult Turkishness," under which scholars and publishers who have spoken about the Armenian genocide have been prosecuted and even killed. It is wrong and unbecoming for the Jewish community to participate in what can best be described as a charade, i.e. the notion that the jury of historians is "still out" on this issue. Imagine if Germany had taken a similar stance with the Holocaust. While hindsight may be 20/20, it is regrettable that the Jewish community telegraphed a message to Turkey that this is a matter of debate and negotiation.

We understand Turkey's difficulty in acknowledging these dark episodes in its past. However,

acknowledging this crime would, rather than spawn a campaign against Turkey, as ambassador Tan claims, prompt applause from the international community. It will be a sign that Turkey can critique its past honestly. The most effective way for a country to resolve its criminal past is to acknowledge the criminal act, try to make some form of recompense and become a force in trying to prevent the repetition of such events. Germany has, with varying degrees of success, achieved that. It is time for Turkey to do the same with the Armenian genocide. And it is time to stop threatening a small vulnerable Jewish community or the one other parliamentary democracy in the Middle East for acknowledging historical truth.

The time has come for the U.S. Congress to join more than 20 other countries, the Vatican, the European Parliament and other world organizations, in affirming the Armenian genocide. Given that H.R. 106 is a nonbinding resolution with no "teeth in it," the hysteria over the resolution has reached a point of absurdity. It is time for Turkey to acknowledge the moral perspective of other countries, and time to move on.

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