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On Armenian Genocide, Politics Trumps Truth

By Leonard Fein

On the surface, it should be an easy call. Here, for example, is the text of a cable that Henry Morgenthau, Sr., then America's ambassador to Turkey, sent to the State Department on July 10, 1915: "Persecution of Armenians assuming unprecedented proportions. Reports from widely scattered districts indicate systematic attempt to uproot peaceful Armenian population and through arbitrary arrests, terrible tortures, whole-sale expulsions, and deportations from one end of the Empire to the other accompanied by frequent instances of rape, pillage and murder, turning into massacre, to bring destruction and destitution on them. These measures are not in response to popular or fanatical demand but are purely arbitrary and directed from Constantinople in the name of military necessity, often in districts where no military operations are likely to take place." And then, on August 11, his cable back home referred to "this effort to exterminate a race."

Morgenthau couldn't use the word "genocide"; it wasn't invented until 1944. But today, the overwhelming majority of scholars around the world are in agreement: The first genocide of the 20th century was committed by Turkey, and the Armenians were its victims.

But Turkey disagrees, labors mightily to impeach the scholarship, to expunge the term, to establish its claim that Armenians were mere casualties of war. Unlike the many nations that have established commissions of truth and reconciliation, that have looked fearlessly into their own past crimes against humanity (most notably, Germany itself), Turkey hires K Street lobbyists to persuade the American public and the U.S. Congress that its hands are clean, its heart is pure. (See, for an example, the statement of former Congressman Bob Livingston, who has been paid at least \$700,000 by Turkey, [here](#).)

It is doubtful that many people are persuaded by the Turks and their lobbyists. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum recognizes the Armenian genocide, as does the Reform Jewish movement, as, one assumes, do most Jewish leaders, at least privately — perhaps even the leaders of the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs and B'nai B'rith International. Yet the leaders of these organizations have steadfastly refused to endorse a bill currently before Congress that would formally acknowledge the fact of the Armenian genocide.

How can that be? Why do they shy away from using the word “genocide” to describe the tragedy of the Armenians at the hands of Ottoman Turkey?

The answer is unsettling. It has nothing to do with history or truth; it has everything to do with the strategic interests of Israel, as also, to a lesser degree, of the United States.

Turkey is a Muslim country that maintains cordial and strategically important relations with both Israel and America. That is presumably why, in 2001, Shimon Peres, then Israel’s foreign minister, could say, “We reject attempts to create a similarity between the Holocaust and the Armenian allegations. Nothing similar to the Holocaust occurred. What the Armenians went through is a tragedy, but not genocide.”

The Peres dismissal led Professor Israel Charny, executive director of the Institute on the Holocaust and Genocide in Jerusalem, to write to Peres: “Even as I disagree with you, it may be that in your broad perspective of the needs of the State of Israel, it is your obligation to circumvent and desist from bringing up the subject with Turkey, but as a Jew and an Israeli I am ashamed of the extent to which you have now entered into the range of actual denial of the Armenian Genocide, comparable to denials of the Holocaust.”

The matter has suddenly become a volatile disruption. In Watertown, a suburb of Boston that is home to some 8,000 Armenians, a challenge has been mounted against ADL’s “No Place For Hate” program, a popular anti-bigotry campaign in which hundreds of communities around the nation participate. And cyberspace is filled with criticism of Abe Foxman, the ADL’s chief, who recently said, “This [the genocide] is not an issue where we take a position one way or the other. This is an issue that needs to be resolved by the parties, not by us. We are neither historians nor arbiters.”

It is true that Foxman is neither a historian nor an arbiter. But it is not possible to believe that he is unaware of the relevant history. And that raises a number of pressing questions:

At what point do we allow Israel's *raison d'état* to override the sober and sobering truth? There's a long record on this one, going back to Israel's efforts to impose silence on American Jews regarding the plight of Soviet Jewry, regarding our views of the junta in Argentina, even regarding the war in Vietnam. Israeli officials will necessarily act in what they perceive as their nation's interests, but is there no way for Israel's friends to express their own considered views without impinging on those interests?

Does not the outrageous stubbornness of Turkey require that Turkey's friends and allies seek to persuade the Turkish government that this abrasive issue will continue to foul Turkey's reputation, that it would be a mature and cleansing act for Turkey at long last to lay open the record and deal frankly with its past, as so many others have done and are doing? Would not such candor raise Turkey's reputation in the family of nations?

And a question for the authors of HR106, the House bill that would formally recognize the genocide: Have you no shame? The resolution "calls upon the President... to recall the proud history of United States intervention in opposition to the Armenian Genocide." But America's record was not proud; it was shameful, as Samantha Power carefully documents in her masterful "A Problem From Hell: America and the Age of Genocide." We, too, ought be honest about the past.