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The Progress Towards Turkish Recognition of the Armenian Genocide

To commit the crime of genocide is perhaps the most heinous act of which a group of people is capable. But to deny that genocide, to systematically cover it up, to discredit and ignore survivors of atrocity and to, even almost a century later, insist on the fictionality of a historical event, is to compound that crime. Yet the shame and stigma carried with the term “genocide” in the modern world means that some prefer the extension of the historical crime to acknowledgement of historical guilt. Such is the case in the Armenian genocide committed by Turkish soldiers in the First World War. From 1915 to 1918, between 600,000 and 1.5 million Armenians were deported and murdered, by neglect or by guns, but all by design. The survivors fled and scattered across the world. They had children, and their children had children, and to this day the Armenian Diaspora carries the memory of the genocide with them. Even decades later the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the survivors still hold out hope for some justice, hope for some recognition by Turkey of the crimes committed upon their ancestors, to keep their deaths from being forgotten and swept away. Armenian organizations such as the Armenian National Institute are determined to continue their search for recognition of the genocide “until such time as acknowledgement is made universal and irreversible.”¹ Recently the Armenian cause has met with marked success all over the world, as the cost of appearing to be soft on human rights becomes higher and higher for governments. However, although the Armenian genocide is slowly but steadily being recognized all over the world, it is unlikely that

¹ Armenian National Institute, "International Recognition of Armenian Genocide," Armenian National Institute, <http://www.armenian-genocide.org/recognition.html> (accessed December 10, 2011).

the Turkish government will accept the historicity of the genocide in the foreseeable future. And although every government that acknowledges the genocide validates the Armenian cause, for Armenians the only true goal is recognition by the Turkish government, descended as it is from the perpetrators of the genocide, the Turkish military.

To date, twenty one nations have ratified legislative recognition of the genocide,² and though this represents significant progress on the part of the Armenians, there is clearly an ulterior motive of vindication among many of these states. The countries that have recognized the genocide include Argentina, Chile, France, Sweden, the Vatican, Italy, and Germany, to name a few of the more high profile states. Perhaps the most interesting feature that many of these states share in common is their own history with genocide and repressive governments. For instance, Germany, Italy, France, and the Vatican were all complicit, to different degrees, in the Holocaust. Similarly in Argentina, state-sponsored murders between 1976 and 1983 was responsible for the death or “disappearing” of some 30,000 people.³ In Chile, the reign of General Pinochet was marked by thousands of deaths among his opposition.⁴ Thus, these states have a vested interest in making it clear that they are opposed to genocide, and standing up for the underdog Armenians is likely part of a larger international agenda to improve their image, and has little to do with an actual desire to see the Armenians themselves vindicated.

In addition to a desire for absolution for their own crimes, governments which have taken steps to recognize the genocide often wish to position themselves in relation to Turkey in international politics or gain the domestic support of the Armenian Diaspora. These motives are

² Genocide.am, "Armenian Genocide - Recognition of the Armenian Genocide," Armenian Genocide - Genocide.am Homepage, http://genocide.am/article/recognition_of_the_armenian_genocide.html (accessed December 10, 2011).

³ Stephanie Hegarty, , "BBC News - Argentina's Dirty War lessons for the world," BBC – Homepage, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-15736895> (accessed December 10, 2011).

⁴ BBC, "BBC NEWS | Americas | Pinochet's rule: Repression and economic success," BBC News - Home, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/63821.stm> (accessed December 10, 2011).

clear in the ongoing cases of Israel and the United States. Late last year in Israel, the Knesset Education, Culture, and Sports Committee began discussing an Armenian Genocide Recognition bill. Israel's actions in this case are clearly motivated by their desire to unsettle their longtime ally but recent enemy Turkey.⁵ Since the Knesset debates began, Israeli politicians have been deeply and publicly divided. The conversation has changed from one centered on Israel's relationship with Turkey, although the need to repair that relationship in an increasingly hostile Middle East is becoming more urgent,⁶ to a discussion about Israel's own history with genocide.⁷ A typical responses to this debate is Turkish scholar M. Hakan Yavuz's January op-ed in the Jerusalem Post, in which he pointed out that Israel's past avoidance of the Armenian Genocide topic was based solely on political motives, ironic in a state with its roots in the moral horror of the Holocaust.⁸ Despite Yavuz and those who share his opinion, many public figures in Israel have come forward to declare that the Armenian case is a moral one, and that to recognize it is a moral imperative. However, the political dangers of the region suggest that this debate will follow the pattern of the previous occasions the Armenian case has entered the Israeli public sphere, and fade away. On the other side of the world, the United States seems to be more interested in its domestic politics. In March of 2010, as mid-term elections approached, the American House Foreign Affairs Committee passed a resolution to declare that the murders of Armenians in WWI were in fact genocide. This action made some headlines, but was largely fruitless, and soon vanished without being debated on the floor of Congress. The "annual

⁵ Jonathan Lis, "Knesset to hold session on Armenian genocide - Haaretz Daily Newspaper | Israel News," *Israel News - Haaretz Israeli News* source, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/knesset-to-hold-session-on-armenian-genocide-1.296894> (accessed December 10, 2011).

⁶ Elad Benari, "Report: Knesset to Recognize Armenian Genocide," *Arutz Sheva*, source <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/151079#.Ty3-81ynN8M>(accessed February 10, 2012).

⁷ Attila Somfalvi, "Knesset Must Recognize Armenian Genocide," *ynet news*, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4166801,00.html> (accessed February 10, 2012).

⁸ M. Hakan Yavuz and Tal Buenos, "Armenian Genocide: Israel Must Maintain Its Moral Compass," *Jerusalem Post*, <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Columnists/Article.aspx?id=253615>(Accessed February 10, 2012).

Armenian genocide resolution”⁹ was apparently brought up largely because of American politicians’ desire “to score points with the highly organized Armenian-American lobby.”¹⁰ More recently, Secretary Hillary Clinton referred to the Armenian genocide as an “historical debate” and claimed that “to try to use government power to resolve historical issues, I think, opens a door that is a very dangerous one to go through,” and stated that the Obama administration would not recognize the genocide.¹¹ This is in direct contrast to her pledge, during her campaign for President, to have the genocide recognized as such during her time in office. Secretary Clinton’s change of position on the Armenian issue is a perfect example of the United States’ ever-changing stance on the genocide: to follow the direction of the domestic winds.

In France, the question of the genocide involves a potent combination of domestic and international politics. France passed a law recognizing the genocide over a decade ago, but the conversation was recently revived when, last December, the French government passed another law making denial of the Armenian genocide a crime. This law is in the tradition of laws criminalizing Holocaust denial, and President Sarkozy has sworn to sign it as soon as possible. However, over seventy French senators have signed a petition for the bill to be examined by a constitutional court, and its future remains uncertain. According to French deputy Lionel Tardy “This is an atomic bomb for the Elysee (Sarkozy’s office) which didn’t see it coming.”¹² The fallout that Tardy refers to is domestic opposition from Turkish-French citizens and strong international opposition from the Turkish government. In the past, France has taken a curious

⁹ Barkey, Henri J., “The Armenian genocide resolution is a farce all around,” *The Washington Post: National, World & D.C. Area News and Headlines - The Washington Post*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/03/02/AR2010030202375.html> (accessed December 10, 2011).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The Armenian Reporter, “ANCA condemns Sec. Clinton’s comments on Armenian Genocide,” *The Armenian Reporter*, <http://www.reporter.am/go/article/2012-01-31-anca-condemns-sec--clinton-s-comments-on-armenian-genocide> (Accessed February 10, 2012).

¹² France 24, “France’s Armenia Genocide Law Put on Hold,” *France 24*, <http://www.france24.com/en/20120131-frances-armenia-genocide-law-put-hold> (Accessed February 10, 2012).

position on human rights, promoting an image abroad of being pro-human rights while engaging in strong anti-Muslim rhetoric at home, including its choice to outlaw the Burka. France's pro human rights stance is clear in its choice to recognize the genocide at all, and to criminalize it, but subtextual to such conversations is the Armenian case's utility in feeding French anti-Muslim feelings. In fact, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan insisted that the bill was "tantamount to discrimination and racism," and threatened to break off lucrative economic ties with France if the law came into effect.¹³ As the debate rages, it becomes clear that for governments, the question of recognizing the moral atrocity of genocide is not an ethical one, but rather a question of political gain and loss, in which the sufferings of the Armenian people, supposedly at the heart of the matter, are largely unimportant.

In spite of both assertive and tentative steps forward by Armenian allies, the Turkish government continues to display overblown reactions to the very suggestion of acknowledgement, both by themselves or other nations. When French President Sarkozy commented on Turkey's need to recognize the genocide, the Turkish government bitterly responded that "Those who are not able to face their own history for having carried out colonialism for centuries, for treating foreigners as second-class people, do not have the right to teach Turkey a history lesson or call for Turkey to face its history."¹⁴ This statement neatly sidesteps the question of the genocide, cleverly turning the issue into one of France's past, rather than one of Turkey's. At the same time, in the United States, the last two times Congressional committees considered a resolution to recognize the genocide, the Turkish government has

¹³ Al Jazeera English, "France's Armenia Genocide Law Put on Hold," *Al Jazeera English*, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2012/01/201213113404166611.html> (Accessed February 10, 2012).

¹⁴ panArmenian.net, "Turkey indignant over Sarkozy's statement on Armenian Genocide - PanARMENIAN.Net," Armenian News - PanARMENIAN.Net, <http://www.panarmenian.net/eng/news/80340/> (accessed December 10, 2011).

recalled its ambassador.¹⁵ For decades, the Turkish government has valued its honor, and its desire to avoid paying reparations such as Germany has paid, above the rights of the descendants of the Armenians; they show no sign of changing their position. If anything, in an increasingly unstable region and threatening world, they are likely to cement their position more firmly.

In spite of the bleak international outlook, a potentially powerful new ally has thrown its support behind the Armenian cause. The “hactivist” group Anonymous vowed on January 25th to attack American and Turkish government websites if the two countries continued to deny the genocide. The shadowy group gave the United States government until the end of the year, but included no such grace period for Turkey. Two days after Anonymous uploaded their mission statement to youtube, the Turkish government website briefly went offline. At the time of writing, the strength of this group’s dedication to this cause remained unclear. Their video statement about the genocide is notable for vocalizing frustration against the politicization of the genocide recognition, shown when it attacks American politician’s regular campaign promises to officially recognize the genocide, and for expressing the highest level of acknowledgement possible from Turkey, demanding it pay reparations comparable to German Holocaust reparations. The video also lets slip not uncommon prejudicial European feelings towards Turkey, telling it that “you will not join the European Union,”¹⁶ apparently ignorant of the irony of their own politicization of genocide. But Anonymous has not yet been able to effect any of its goals, and the question of whether the hacker group will do more harm than good, or whether

¹⁵ JOHN D MCKINNON, "Armenian Genocide Resolution Advances Despite Obama Push - WSJ.com," Business News & Financial News - The Wall Street Journal - Wsj.com, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704187204575101981018521028.html> (accessed December 10, 2011).

¹⁶Nanore Barsoumian, “Anonymous’ Launches Operation Armenian Genocide,” *The Armenian Weekly*, <http://www.armenianweekly.com/2012/02/02/anonymous-launches-operation-armenian-genocide/comment-page-1/>(Accessed February 10, 2012).

they will more deeply engage in the politicization they scorn, remained unanswered at the time of writing.

Unfortunately for the political outlook, the crime of the Armenian genocide has none of the immediacy of genocides such as those in Guatemala and the Holocaust because all the survivors are dead. There is no one left to testify, to give schoolchildren the life-altering experience a visit by a Holocaust survivor can bring. It is a question of what the ancestors of modern Turks did to the ancestors of modern Armenians, a battle to dig up the truth fought by descendants and politicians. The fact is, the Turkish government as it stands today may never be willing to fully recognize the genocide. But perhaps if the rest of the world recognizes it, and if independent groups like Anonymous apply pressure, they will at least soften their stance. And perhaps if that happens, there can be some peace among the descendants of genocide.

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