

Judgment Time

Should America recognize an Armenian Genocide?

By Barbara Lerner

National Review Online, September 07, 2007

Calls for America to recognize the Armenian tragedy of 1915 as genocide, and to condemn the Turks for it, grow louder, more insistent, and more varied by the week.

The Armenian lobby, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D., Calif.), and a handful of other longtime congressional supporters are no longer the only people calling for this recognition. They are joined not just by the usual old secular human-rights crusaders of the Left like [Noam Chomsky](#) and [Robert Fisk](#), but also by [new voices from the Right](#) — including some I respect. Should we do it? Is it really beyond dispute that the Ottoman Turks were guilty of genocide in World War I?

Most Europeans have already decided that Turkey is guilty as charged. In France, arguing that the Turks might be guilty of anything less inhuman than a deliberate, calculated, genocide is considered a hate crime; Princeton historian Bernard Lewis [was convicted of](#) it and fined a nominal sum. Here in America and in Britain, other historians and scholars who argue that the facts don't justify the genocide label — men like [Guenter Lewy](#), [Edward J. Erickson](#), [Andrew Mango](#), [Justin McCarthy](#), [Stanford Shaw](#), [Norman Stone](#), and [Michael Gunter](#) — are regularly compared to Holocaust deniers like David Irving and Ernst Zundel, and dismissed as “genocide deniers.”

On many blogs and websites, Armenians often accuse these scholars of being part of a Jewish and/or Zionist conspiracy, because Israel has always steadfastly rejected the genocide charge, as Turkey's own Jewish citizens do. In America, all of the existing long-established Jewish organizations also reject it (that is, until last month when [one major American Jewish organization](#) capitulated under mounting pressure).

Not all Turks reject the genocide charge. A few transnationally acclaimed Turks, like Nobel prize-winning novelist [Orhan Pamuk](#), pride themselves on accepting the judgment that Turkey was guilty of genocide in World War I, but the vast majority of Turks reject that label. They don't deny the fact that hellish things were done to Armenians in their country in the hellish World War I years, when much of Anatolia became a bloody battleground and mass graveyard for everyone caught up in it, civilians no less than soldiers. No honest Turk or legitimate scholar denies that. The fight is about whether genocide is an accurate or fair characterization of the Turkish response to the situation that confronted them in 1915.

Turks say it's neither fair nor accurate, and feel they are the victims of a well-orchestrated, one-sided, Western smear campaign. They see the accusation of genocide as an attempt to resurrect old stereotypes about “the terrible Turk,” to demonize their early 20th-century Ottoman forbears, and to pin a badge of inferiority on Turks today. Turkey's newly reelected AKP government has long been committed to meeting Europe's standards for Turkey's admission to the European Union. It has already accepted many other allegedly superior European standards and judgments, some gladly, others reluctantly. So far, it has refused to bow on this one.

In the United States, the Bush administration has also refused to bow to the European judgment, but support for Senate and House Resolutions recognizing the Armenian [genocide is building](#). The growing numbers of Americans who campaign for genocide recognition claim that if we are

to retain any moral credibility in the world, it is past time for us to join the international moral consensus against Turkey; shameful of us to hold back for prudential reasons. They argue with great passion, that a fundamental moral principle is at stake here because the Turks in World War I were, in all essential respects, comparable to Germans in World War II; and that Armenians then were comparable to the Jews of the Holocaust, a quarter of a century later. The inescapable conclusion, they insist, is that common decency requires us to condemn the Turks as we condemned the Nazis.

Americans who take a public stand against the increasingly popular genocide recognition movement, arguing that it would be a serious mistake for us to endorse it, generally prefer to sidestep the moral question altogether. Their focus is on the geo-strategic significance of such a move, and its implications for our national security. In fact, there is a strong *moral* case to be made against the genocide resolution, because there are major differences — between Nazis and Turks, and between Armenians and Jews — that any fair-minded judge would feel honor-bound to take into account before passing moral judgment on the Turks.

First, though, I want to present at least a brief, partial summary of the geostrategic argument, because genocide zealots who indignantly refuse to even consider the geostrategic argument are not displaying a higher morality. Rather, they are being irresponsible. There are times when we should give moral considerations precedence over prudential ones, but there is never a time when we should do so blindly, without estimating the cost and deciding if we are honestly willing to pay it. The risk here is that endorsing the genocide resolution will turn what is already a growing rift between America and Turkey, into a historic parting of the ways between our two nations.

To make even a rough estimate of the cost — to our position in the world and our national security — of such a radical realignment, Americans need to know more than many zealots seem to know about Turkey today: about her geostrategic position, and about what the longtime alliance between our two countries has meant, to us, to the Turks, and to the world.

Turkey today is an 84-year-old republic with a population of some 75 million, and a rapidly expanding modern economy; an economy based on the growing education, skills, and know-how of its people, not the luck of oil.

Turkey has one of the biggest, best-trained militaries in the world. It is a long-time NATO ally — the only NATO ally with a population that is 99-percent Muslim. Geographically, it sits atop a strategic-ally, vital world crossroads. For half of a century, it has held the line with us against both Communist and Islamist aggression, sending its soldiers to fight and die alongside ours, on battlefields from Korea to Afghanistan. Unlike our other NATO allies, Turkey did all this with the Soviet Union, as well as a number of Islamist states, sitting right on her borders.

For many decades, Turkey's alliance with America was an especially close one, not just in NATO but in areas far beyond it, to our mutual benefit, in the Middle East and elsewhere. Today, that alliance is seriously strained and in danger of breaking apart altogether. Many Americans know that part of the tension between us stems from the fact that Turkey opposed our invasion of Iraq in 2003. Many Americans feel that we have as much reason to be angry about that split as they do.

Many fewer Americans understand that ordinary Turks aren't simply nursing a grievance over past disagreements about Iraq. Their anger and pain is a response to what is going on in their own country *today* — to the reality that members from the PKK, a Kurdish terrorist group that finds

sanctuary in Northern Iraq, keep sneaking across the border, blowing up innocent civilians in Turkish cities and killing Turkish soldiers on Turkish soil.

Turks are angry that our Kurdish allies in Iraq refuse to restrain the PKK and sometimes even threaten to unleash further PKK violence if Turkey balks at Kurdish government demands. They are angry and hurt that we refuse to seriously pressure the Kurds, even when the weapons the PKK uses to kill Turks are [American weapons](#). They are angry and frustrated that our diplomats repeatedly warn the Turkish military against taking any cross-border military action to put an end to the aggression themselves.

Popular grief and anger builds as the Turkish death toll rises, week after week, feeding into a growing Islamist trend in Turkey, as witnessed by the fact that Turkey is no longer governed by any of its old secular parties. It is now instead governed by what the EU and trans-nationals everywhere are pleased to call “a moderate Islamic party.” This party not only embraces the EU, but also has much closer relations with the Arab world than any previous government of the Turkish Republic Ataturk founded in 1923.

All this leaves our traditional, longtime Turkish friends — pro-American, Ataturk-style, secular Republican nationalists — between a rock and a hard place. They strongly oppose the growing power of Islam in Turkey, as well as Turkey’s increasing turn to the East, but they are as dismayed as other Turks at our unwillingness to do what needs to be done to stop PKK attacks, or to allow the Turkish military to stop them.

They are equally dismayed by the growing western attempt to brand Turkey as a genocidal nation. Still reeling from the AKP’s latest electoral victory, the enthusiastic embrace of the AKP government by the EU and much of the American press, and by widespread western attempts to portray the AKP’s Turkish opponents as anti-democratic elitists, they feel betrayed abroad and on the defensive at home. All things considered, this doesn’t look like a propitious moment for America to take a stand on the Armenian genocide question.

This is a serious argument that deserves to be taken seriously, but the moral argument is equally serious and deserves to be addressed in an equally serious way. To do that, we cannot focus only on the main similarity between Jews in Germany and Armenians in Turkey: the terrible tragedies both groups endured at the hands of their countrymen. We must take an honest look at the main differences as well.

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