

ADL and the Turks

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Under a longstanding relationship, Jewish organizations have lobbied against legislation undermining U.S.-Turkish relations (ADL Spars with Armenians, Oct. 29). This strengthened U.S.-Turkish strategic ties and Israel's ties with its sole regional ally. It also furthered the well-being of Turkey's 20,000 Jews - living amidst 70 million Muslims - who are protected by their government but menaced by extremists.

Armenian activists deserve respect for preserving the memory of horrors suffered by their ancestors. But there is respectable, if not unanimous, historical literature concluding there was no genocide. I saw evidence in Van, Turkey, of massacres of Muslims by Russian soldiers collaborating with Armenian insurgents.

ADL National Director Abraham Foxman fired his Boston director for saying it was genocide. When Boston ADL leaders rebelled, Foxman panicked and - without research - reversed decades of ADL policy by saying it was "tantamount to genocide." Foxman's explanation that he was preserving "Jewish unity" is maladroit because he acted against interests of Israel and Turkish Jews. Jak Kamhi, leader of Turkish Jews (whom Foxman did not consult despite promising for years to protect them), wrote, "ADL has put at risk our community and the important multilateral relationship between Turkey, Israel and the U.S."

Foxman did say the ADL would oppose the genocide resolution in Congress. But his volte-face strengthened its proponents; if there was genocide, why not proclaim it? The ADL failed to comprehend three key factors: 1. Turks view the campaign as branding them a nation of criminals. It is as if a parliament condemned Israel as genocidal because of Deir Yassin. Turkey's government, pressured by nationalists, could not fail to act against U.S. strategic interests (e.g., supply of troops in Iraq) if the resolution passed. 2. ADL's abrupt reversal precipitated accusations that Jews were conspiring to defame Turkey. Of course, anti-Semitism is to be condemned (Turkey's government should have done more), but Foxman clumsily gave ammunition to those inclined to blame Jews. 3. Armenian activists, who seek to shatter U.S.-Turkish ties, cannot be placated. The ADL remains under fierce attack from Armenians for opposing the resolution.

Other organizations successfully navigated this minefield. JINSA and B'nai B'rith International opposed stigmatizing Turkey as contrary to U.S. interests. The American Jewish Committee revised its position in a thoughtful blog that did not attract brickbats.

A genocide resolution in a prior Congress was halted by a phone call from Shimon Peres to President Clinton. This time, the resolution was shelved when congressmen belatedly realized it portended disaster for the United States. The ADL's actions diminished the importance of the Jewish community as allies of Turkey.

(The writer is former National Vice Chair of ADL and a member of the Executive Committee of JINSA, the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs.)