



Only So Much Moral Clarity

By Daniel Larison
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ON OCT. 10, the House Foreign Affairs Committee voted 27-21 in favor of a resolution recognizing the organized deportations and mass killings of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during WWI as genocide, prompting Turkey to recall its Ambassador from Washington. Commemorated by Armenians on April 24 – the date of the 1915 arrest of prominent politicians, journalists, academics, and clerics– the subsequent genocide of 1.5 million was a state-sponsored effort crafted by the ruling Committee of Union and Progress to eliminate the Armenian population of the eastern Anatolian provinces. CUP agents, Kurdish irregulars, and members of the Ottoman military carried out a series of massacres and forced marches into the Syrian desert clearly intended for the purpose of extermination.

Though it is recognized by dozens of governments as such, the Armenian genocide remains bitterly contested by the Turkish government, which criminalizes speech that refers to the genocide under an article that penalizes “insulting Turkishness”. As related in *The Burning Tigris* and *A Shameful Act* by Peter Balakian and Taner Akcam, there really is no question about state planning and execution of a deliberate genocide. One U.S. consul stationed in the empire at the time cabled home that the authorities made no “secret of the fact that their main object is the extermination of the whole Armenian race.”

In the same week that former Bush speechwriter Michael Gerson lectured conservatives on the importance of “moral ideals in politics and foreign policy,” the White House, under intense pressure from the Turkish government, again endorsed Ankara’s policy of denying the Armenian genocide: “the determination of whether or not the events constitute a genocide should be a matter for historical inquiry, not legislation.”

This high-minded concern for the integrity of historical research and wariness about using the word “genocide” are remarkable changes for this administration. President Bush has pronounced the conflict in Darfur genocide, he and his supporters have demagogued fears of genocide in post-withdrawal Iraq, and he has invoked revisionist theories of the causes of the Cambodian genocide to bash opponents of the Iraq war but when confronted with the acknowledgement of the first genocide of the 20th century, the administration becomes mute. Rarely has its lack of “moral clarity” been so clear.

Despite the White House's accommodation, Turkey has begun preparing for an invasion of northern Iraq in response to attacks attributed to the Kurdish Workers' Party. Its timing is meant to send a signal: Ankara will make the situation for our soldiers in Iraq much more difficult if the resolution advances, and there have been hints that Turkey might even cease military co-operation with the U.S., as it has already done with France over a similar dispute. According to Turkish MP Egemen Bagis, passage of the resolution "would mean losing Turkey's support in the region." It is this willingness to sacrifice its American alliance over the Armenian resolution that makes Turkey's genocide denial –which might otherwise arguably belong to its internal affairs– a legitimate concern for Congress.

Armenian genocide denial on the Right is not limited to the debate over the House resolution. Responding to the ADL's grudging acknowledgement of the genocide, National Review contributor Michael Rubin wrote, "But, on the issue of whether genocide –a deliberate plan to eradicate a people– occurred or not, there is a big gap between the narrative of Diaspora communities and that of prominent historians. The historical debate is more complex." Granted, the debate is complex, but certain basic realities are no longer in question.

Akcam's work in particular puts the lie to Rubin's claim about the differences between the Armenian Diaspora and "prominent historians," since he was born in Turkey and is a scholar of history and genocide studies. As for "prominent historians," Bernard Lewis stands out as an Ottoman historian who once described the genocide of 1915 as a "holocaust" and has since conveniently adopted the denialist line. As published evidence of the genocide has become more widely available, Lewis has become more intransigently hostile to the idea, using his reputation to make denying the Armenian genocide seem respectable. Were it any other genocide, denialism would rightly make Lewis politically radioactive, but supporters of the Iraq war embrace him and take him as their authority on the region.

This raises a number of questions. What sort of ally would weaken an alliance or endanger Americans over a symbolic measure? What sort of ally would make such threats for the sake of perpetuating a policy that criminalizes free speech and suppresses historical inquiry? Not the sort of ally that Washington should wish to appease. And what sort of administration would yield to blackmail and endorse the denial of a documented state-run genocide? Apparently it is President Bush's sort of administration, whose members are very free with the "lessons of history" as long as they can re-imagine the past to suite some bellicose design.