



Forget Turkey

What the Armenian Genocide Resolution Is Really About

by Irshad Manji

Post Date Tuesday, October 23, 2007

Now playing on Capitol Hill: a political drama over whether Turkey deserves denunciation for its mass deportation and murder of Armenians starting in 1915, otherwise known as genocide.

Initiated by the House Foreign Affairs Committee, this symbolic vote has sparked more than symbolic anger from at the White House--and from the Turkish government itself. The Bush administration insists that now is the not the time to be offending Turkey, which borders Iraq and provides the United States with key access routes in its war on terror.

Then there are ordinary people like my sister. More accustomed to condemning President Bush, she too frowns on the anti-genocide resolution. "How would it benefit the U.S.?" she asked me bluntly in an e-mail last week. Her question was not that of an American wanting to protect her country's best interests, but that of a Canadian who does not trust the motives of her narcissistic neighbor. I told my sister I would get back to her.

The timing of this resolution should raise questions--all the more so because of who initiated it: Democrats in Congress. They are the gang for whom success in today's Iraq, not slaughter in yesterday's Turkey, is the signal issue in America. HBO's Bill Maher nailed that point when he quipped, "This is why the voters gave control of the House to the Democrats. To send a stern message to the Ottoman Empire."

Still, there is at least one important reason to recognize the Armenian genocide now, and it relates directly to America's implosion in Iraq: Democracy has been redefined not just in the Middle East, but also in the United States. These days, American politicians must pay attention to "voters" who live well beyond their shores.

As House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has put it, "Some of the things that are harmful to our troops relate to values--Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, torture.... Our troops are well-served when we declare who we are as a country and increase the respect that people have for us as a nation."

Hers is a subtle argument about the need for the United States to reclaim the moral high ground on human rights. It might be too subtle for most Americans who, let us face it, have little concern for what may or may not have happened countless miles away more than three generations ago--especially if the debate harms U.S. troops right now.

But Ms. Pelosi's argument is not meant for Americans. It is intended for an international audience.

America remains the only country in the world with a universal constituency. Domestic politics in the United States often have a profound effect in every corner of the earth, from determining immigration flows and investment patterns to handing leaders and their heirs the excuses they crave to blur the lines between God and government.

The same cannot be said of domestic politics in modern, multicultural entrepôts such as India, Britain, or China. Nor do domestic politics in feisty, fiery states like Iran and Israel set precedents for the rest of us. Not yet, anyway.

No wonder so much of the world seethes that only Americans can vote for the next president of the United States. I hear it from young Muslims whenever I travel to Europe. And it is not just Muslims who express a sense of disenfranchisement. In my home of Canada, a regular columnist for the newspaper of record recently suggested that Al Gore would be president if people outside of the United States could cast ballots.

How many countries enjoy a reach so long and far that non-citizens would care enough to want a say in its leader--or journalists would care enough to speculate how the rest of the world would vote?

America's universal constituency is what House Democrats are acknowledging in their Armenian genocide resolution.

Doubtless, I am about to be accused of naïveté. Left-wing critics will sniff that this condemnation is a pretext to milk campaign contributions from Armenian genocide survivors, who, like their Jewish counterparts, are dying off. And, bonus, worshipping at the altar of their potent lobbies has its rewards, after all. Right-wing detractors will sneer that this move is meant to undermine the war on terror by alienating a crucial ally, even if unintentionally. Indeed, many House Democrats have begun wavering on the anti-genocide measure because of Turkey's threat to block its borders to American war planners should any vote pass.

That threat may be moot: With tensions escalating between military conflict now looming between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the border that Washington desperately needs to be free and clear is not. Ankara has been moving tanks, troops, and choppers to the Turkey-Iraq border. America's priorities do not count nearly as much as they did a week ago, genocide resolution or no genocide resolution.

Which brings us back to the original case for pronouncing on the Armenian slaughter--a moral case.

The question for Americans ought to be: Since when is it wrong to speak out against genocide, however many years have elapsed? People of good conscience continued raising their voices against slavery in the United States well after abolition. Are they reckless or sinister for offending many Americans? In any event, is causing offense a reason to stop remembering?

Here is the question for Turks: Why should your history be immune to America's judgment when, according to surveys of global attitudes about the United States, you as a nation are among the most anti-American (read: judgmental) in all of the Muslim world?

Finally, a question for my sister in Vancouver who suspects American intentions: As a voter in that massive caucus called international public opinion, are you ready to credit some United States legislators for maturing?

I am not sure. Canadians take smug glee in the claim that only one-third of United States Congress members have passports. It is an old rumor that Democrats, at least, are striving to shed.

Will non-Americans meet them half way, or will we continue to charge them all with tribalism in order to appease a deeper insecurity within our own nations?

The campaign is on. Welcome to democracy.

IRSHAD MANJI, author of *The Trouble with Islam Today* and senior fellow with the European Foundation for Democracy, is writing a book about the need for moral courage in an age of self-censorship.