

Turkey's Genocide Diplomacy: What's in a word?

Piotr Zalewski

20 April 2010

On 4 March 2010, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the US House of Representatives voted by a narrow margin to recognise the massacre of up to 1.5 million Armenians, “conceived and carried out by the Ottoman Empire from 1915 to 1923”, as genocide. Eight days later, Sweden became the latest country to recognise the Armenian genocide when its *Riksdagen* (parliament) adopted a similar resolution.

The Turkish response to the House vote was fast and furious. Within a day's time, the government recalled its ambassador from Washington. (He has since returned.) Soon thereafter, officials in Ankara began to warn that Turkey might reconsider its contribution to the NATO coalition in Afghanistan and restrict US forces' access to the Incirlik airbase, a step that would hinder the American withdrawal from Iraq in 2011. Finally, on 16 March, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan made headlines all over the world by threatening to expel 100,000 Armenians from Turkey. “In my country there are 170,000 Armenians,” said Erdogan. “70,000 of them are citizens. We tolerate 100,000 more. So, what am I going to do tomorrow? If necessary I will tell the 100,000: okay, time to go back to your country. Why? They are not my citizens. I am not obliged to keep them in my country.”¹

Notorious as Erdogan may be for his lack of self-restraint, his remarks were not a slip of the tongue or an unpremeditated outburst. Instead, they were the latest instalment of a longstanding policy that uses fear tactics to forestall the use of the genocide label by other governments and parliaments. It is a policy that is coming to be seen as paranoid, damaging and ineffective.

Turks see the issue of genocide recognition as a matter of national pride and international prestige. Their government has failed to accept, however, that what most hurts Turkey's standing in the world is not international recognition of the Armenian genocide, but its own efforts to block it.

Profiting from a general climate of decreased censorship and greater freedom of speech, an increasing number of Turkish liberals have dared to question the official history of the ‘Armenian issue’. The government, however, has refused not only to entertain any talk of genocide but has declined to shoulder any of the moral burden of the events of 1915, whatever one might choose to call them. Official history in

¹ The figure of 100,000 Armenians living illegally in Turkey seems enormously inflated – perhaps as to put additional pressure on the Armenian government. Most experts estimate that only between 10,000 and 20,000 illegal Armenians reside in Turkey.

Piotr Zalewski is a freelance journalist and researcher at European Stability Initiative (ESI). In the spring of 2009, ESI published “Noah's Dove Returns. Armenia, Turkey and the Debate on Genocide”, a paper on Turkey's troubled relations with Armenia.

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Turkey still places the Armenian massacres on a par with the suffering of all Ottoman subjects during the First World War. As Taner Akcam, an historian, pointed out several years ago, “There is no presupposition [in Turkey] that what happened in 1915 was any type of crime. Turkish denial maintains that the state had the right to relocate its own people. If some of the deportees perished, that was a tragedy, not a crime – therefore no moral or legal condemnation is necessary.” Although it might still refuse to describe the 1995 massacre in Srebrenica as genocide, the Serbian parliament recently passed a resolution that “strongly condemns the crime committed against the Bosnian Muslim population of Srebrenica” and extends “condolences and an apology to the families of the victims”. In Turkey, such a scenario, with regard to the events of 1915, remains inconceivable.

Over the past few decades Turkey has wasted tremendous political capital on resisting recognition of the Armenian genocide, particularly in the United States. It has spent millions of dollars lobbying members of Congress. It has repeatedly threatened to close the Incirlik base and to reduce its cooperation with the US in Iraq and Afghanistan. Recently, it has also taken to suggesting that US genocide recognition will be the nail in the coffin of the stalled reconciliation process with Armenia, under way since 2008. (Given that the process has failed to deliver the sort of results Turkey expected – among other things, Armenian concessions on Nagorno Karabakh – Ankara might actually be looking for a convenient pretext to put it on the back burner.)

Round after round, Ankara has boxed itself into a corner. Having made no effort to prepare the ground at home for the possibility of US recognition, it has raised expectations among Turks that their government will take drastic measures if and when recognition takes place. In doing so, it has placed Turkey's strategic relationship with its main NATO ally in danger. Incongruously, the relationship now seems to hinge not so much on the recognition of historical truth – no one in the current US administration seriously doubts *what* took place in 1915 – as on the American President's choice of words. Never mind that Barack Obama, Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton repeatedly used the word genocide when referring to the events of 1915 before they took office. And never mind that Obama would not be the first sitting president to pronounce it. Ronald Reagan did so in 1981.

As much as Turkey resists using the genocide label to describe the events of 1915, it seems to have no qualms about throwing it around indiscriminately. To then Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit, Israel's 2002 incursion into the West Bank was tantamount to “genocide against the Palestinians before the eyes of the whole world”. To Erdogan, the ruthless Chinese response to the July 2009 rioting in Xinjiang province, which claimed at least 197 lives, was also “a kind of genocide”. Dropping the bar so low when it comes to the Palestinians and the Uighurs – and raising it so high when it comes to the Armenians – has not made Turkey's stance on genocide recognition any stronger.

On April 24, the annual cycle in Turkey-US relations will come full circle. On the day when the international community commemorates the events of 1915, millions of Turks will yet again wait in trepidation to see whether the President of the United States pronounces the ‘g-word’.

Here is a novel question – so what if he does? For decades, Turks have lived in fear that genocide recognition in America will pave the way for compensation and restitution claims against the Turkish government. There is no evidence whatsoever, however, that this would happen. Some, like the European Parliament, have gone so far as to spell it out. In a June 1987 resolution, the EP recognised that “neither political nor legal or material claims against present-day Turkey can be derived from the recognition of this historical event as an act of genocide”. A study commissioned by the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) is just as unambiguous: although the events of 1915 had “all the elements of genocide”, it concludes that they cannot give rise to any “legal, financial or territorial claims” under the UN Genocide Convention.²

Although a number of successful lawsuits have been filed by descendants of Armenian genocide victims, these have been against insurance companies, not the Turkish state. Even in such cases, however, the genocide issue did not play any significant role. Despite Armenian plaintiffs' protestations to the contrary, the question of what to label the events that produced the loss of life or property in question has been deemed – for the most part – irrelevant. There has been speculation that insurance companies forced to pay claims to

² “The Applicability of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide to Events which Occurred during the Early Twentieth Century” (available at <http://www.ictj.org/images/content/7/5/759.pdf>).

heirs of Armenian victims might seek redress from Turkey. None of the insurance companies involved have done so; none seems to have even considered trying.

To date, more than 20 countries have recognised the genocide. If recognition were meant to pave the way towards restitution, their courts would certainly have been flooded with Armenian lawsuits. They are not. In fact, not a single genocide-related claim has successfully been made against the Turkish government anywhere in the world – this, despite the fact that genocide resolutions having been passed in countries like France, Germany and Russia.

All this is not to say that restitution or compensation by the Turkish state is impossible. Armenians could, in theory, file claims against the Turkish government – but only in Turkish courts, and only if Turkey adopts a binding legal act allowing them to do so. And that, needless to say, seems unlikely.

At this point in time, with the US in need of all the help it can get in Afghanistan and Iraq, the risk of antagonising a powerful ally like Turkey is simply too great. In all likelihood, therefore, in this year's commemorative remarks on April 24th, Obama will not refer to the events of 1915 as genocide. In Turkish policy circles, this will be trumpeted as a success, but it will be a dubious one. Whatever Obama's choice of words, no one will hold modern Turkey responsible for crimes that took place in the dying years of the Ottoman Empire 95 years ago. People will hold it responsible, however, for being unable to face up to its history. Governments, even one as powerful as America's, can be pressured or blackmailed into making concessions – but international public opinion plays by a different set of rules.