

French Genocide Bill Provokes Uproar, Sparks Debate: Turkish Overreaction May Backfire

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The bill voted up on December 22 by the French parliament (Assemblée Nationale), which would make denial of genocide (including the 1915 genocide against the Armenians in Ottoman Turkey) a crime, has provoked strong reactions from the Turkish government and sparked a debate among Turks and Armenians worldwide. The bill, which must still be debated by the senate, would penalize anyone denying the genocide with up to one year in prison and a €45,000 fine. (1)

The response from Ankara was swift and furious. Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan announced that he had recalled his ambassador from France, frozen all military cooperation with France, and suspended economic and political meetings. (2) In addition, Turkish President Abdullah Gul urged that France withdraw from the Minsk Group, on grounds it could no longer claim to be impartial in the Nagorno-Karabach dispute. (3)

There were not a few ironies to the development. First, Turkish opponents to the bill claimed it would criminalize free speech and hamper historical research – yet, according to Turkey’s penal code Article 301, any mention of the Armenian genocide, in so many words, is deemed an offense and is punishable — so much for free speech and historical research. Over the past months, scores of Turkish intellectuals, journalists, and civil society leaders have been jailed on allegations of affiliation with terrorist organizations because they have spoken out regarding Kurdish civil rights and the Armenian issue. For years writers who addressed the Armenian case, even those who judiciously avoided using the proper term genocide, have been jailed, mishandled, and, in the case of Hrant Dink, murdered. A further irony lies in Erdogan’s charge that France has no right to launch such accusations when it was itself guilty of genocide against Algerians in the independence war. As many journalists noted, this was a back-handed admission of wrongdoing on the part of the Ottoman Turks.

Finally, criticism from Ankara pointed out that French President Nicolas Sarkozy, whose UMP party presented the bill, was doing so because it was speculating on winning support from the estimated half million Armenian voters in France in the next elections. No irony here: it is quite obvious that Sarkozy is using the Armenian issue as a political football. This is, sadly, not the first time that the genocide issue has been cynically exploited. Whenever Washington would get upset with some foreign policy initiative coming out of Ankara, the knee-jerk reaction would be to threaten to use the “g-word” at the White House. Recently, the Israeli Knesset has brought up discussion of the Armenian genocide, as a not-so-subtle response to Turkey’s having put bilateral relations on ice. Such exploitation of mass murder is morally repugnant and only adds to the offense against the memory of those who perished in 1915-1917.

That said, there are a couple of intriguing questions provoked by the French legislators' move worth mention. First: is the vote truly representative of the French parliament's viewpoint? According to French press reports, the bill passed by a "large majority of the fifty or so parliamentarians present," and "about half a dozen voted against it." Out of a total of 577 members of parliament, this does not strike me as constituting an overwhelming mandate. But numbers aside, is it in principle the prerogative of any elected parliamentary body to determine by vote whether or not genocide has been committed? To most honest intellectuals, the Armenian genocide is a historical fact documented through primary sources on various sides, including American, Danish, German, as well as Armenian and Turkish. Secondly, can one legislate morality, by criminalizing denial of historical facts? If it becomes illegal to deny the genocide, does that make its affirmation somehow "more true?" Does that mean that those who deny it will, under threat of punishment, alter their views? Is it not wiser to thrash out the issues of the controversy, as prominent genocide historians continue to do, in the patient effort to convince the doubting Thomases or ideological denialists that what they hysterically reject did in fact occur?

This leads to the real point, and the one occupying center stage in the debate inside Turkey, a debate ironically nourished in part by the French vote. The real point is Turkish recognition of what occurred in 1915. Why cannot the Turkish establishment acknowledge the historical record, relieve itself and its people of the burden of collective guilt, apologize to the descendants of the victims, and work towards reconciliation? Energized by the debate about the French vote, it appears that a growing number of individuals and civil society organizations are accelerating their efforts to arrive at just such a goal. The Human Rights Association Istanbul Branch, put out a press release on December 22, entitled, "Let's Raise Our Voice Against Denial, Not the French Parliament." (4) In their view, denial of a crime against humanity, like genocide, could not be considered a violation of freedom of expression. On those grounds, they called on intellectuals and others to end their campaigns against the French parliament and instead "work for the recognition of the Armenian genocide, the Assyrian genocide and the ethnic cleansing of Greeks by the state and the society as a whole."

On December 24, the DSIP (Revolutionary Socialist Workers' Party) put out a press release arguing along similar lines, and urged recognition of the genocide including all relevant legal, cultural, and political aspects.

A day earlier, Today's Zaman carried an article by Ahsan Yilmaz who criticized the Erdogan government reaction as exaggerated and went on to suggest that the proper way to deal with the problem would be to seek "normalization vis-à-vis 1915." Citing the official Turkish version of events, according to which "several hundred thousand Armenians were either massacred or died because of the terrible conditions during their forced deportation," he put forward the view that the state had a duty to protect these citizens and had failed to do so. "Turkey has to apologize, he concluded, "at least for its inability to protect them. Then, it must invite Armenians abroad to come and get their inheritance in Turkey. Thirdly, Turkey must erect some monuments and build museums for these massacred, great people who had lived in these lands for thousands of years but faced extinction because of some secular-nationalist Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) dictators' faulty, to say the least, decisions and actions."

Although the author compromises with the official Turkish propaganda line, carefully sidestepping any reference to the documented intent to annihilate the Armenian people, what is

noteworthy in his article is his insistence that Turkey must somehow finally deal with its past. That such an article could appear in a leading English-language Turkish publication indicates the breadth of the debate now raging in Turkey. The same Zaman carried a similar piece days later by Sahin Alpay, who saw the crux of the issue in the fact that, despite controversy over the term “genocide,” Armenians were killed through forced deportations, during which even denialists estimated that up to 700,000 died. He concludes with a call for an official apology and cites a retired Turkish Ambassador, Volkan Vural, who said: “What happened in history is unworthy of the Republic of Turkey. If I were in charge, I would also apologize. A state like ours has to do this. The state must tell the deported Armenians and to Greeks forced to leave the country.... ‘I am extending citizenship to you and to your descendants.’ The Armenian problem can be solved not by historians but by politicians. Historical facts are well known.”

With all their limitations, what these articles illustrate is an unprecedented discussion process unfolding in Turkey. Robert Fisk, a seasoned journalist for the Independent, provided further insight into it in a piece entitled, “Turkey’s long road to reconciliation” published on December 25. (5) He was reporting on a promotional tour in Turkey that he had just completed to push the Turkish translation of his book, *The Great War for Civilisation*. He had conducted a whopping 21 interviews with Turkish TV and press to introduce his book. And the book, he writes, contains a chapter on 1915 entitled, “The First Genocide,” – yes, “genocide” even in the Turkish translation — despite Article 301. Fisk said that that most journalists did not even question his account, for the simple reason that, although officialdom denies it, “[f]or hundreds of thousands of Turks, the Armenian genocide is now a fact of history.” How so? he asks rhetorically. And he explains that it is because “[t]housands of Turks are digging into their own family histories. Why, they are asking, did they have Armenian grandmothers and great-grandmothers?” (6)

Fisk poses the obvious question: why can’t the Turks face up to this history as the Germans dealt with the Holocaust? He referred to Erdogan’s admission just a few weeks earlier of the massacres of thousands of Kurds, adding that Zaman’s coverage of that event had queried whether or not this might be a prelude to acknowledgement of the Armenian genocide. Again, Fisk pointed out, the phrase used by Zaman was not “alleged genocide” but “genocide.” Such ostensibly minor details might be considered nitpicking, but they are actually loaded with significance, and may indeed presage some positive developments.

Looking at such events as part of a long but steady process of questioning inside Turkey, it appears that the French bill, quite irrespective of its merits or demerits, may have given a healthy nudge to that process.

Notes

1. For the vote and the text see <http://fr.news.yahoo.com/les-d%C3%A9put%C3%A9s-votent-le-texte-sur-la-n%C3%A9gation-122750856.html>, <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/13/pdf/rapports/r4035.pdf>, <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/13/ta-commission/r4035-a0.asp>

2. See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/dec/22/turkey-france-freeze-relations-over-genocide/>, <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/tuerkische-vorwuerfe-gegen-paris-armenien-gegen-algerien-11578860.html>

3.

<http://www.todayszaman.com/news-266508-gul-urges-france-to-withdraw-from-minsk-group-if-genocide-bill-enacted.html>

4.

<http://www.armenianweekly.com/2011/12/25/turkish-rights-group-lets-unite-against-genocide-denial-not-against-france/>

5.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-turkeys-long-road-to-reconciliation-6281198.html#>

6. The phenomenon of Turkish citizens' discovering their Armenian ethnic roots going back to the 1915 genocide first broke through public silence when Fetiye Cetin published her book, *My Grandmother* in 2004. Since then numerous biographical studies have appeared in Turkey as personal memoirs or institutional studies documenting the fact that tens if not hundreds of thousands of Armenian children, especially girls, were spared death and forcefully assimilated as concubines, slaves, or wives of Turks. Their offspring and their descendants now bear witness to this fact. But how to interpret this unique occurrence? On the one hand, it shows that, although some Turks sought to exploit the Armenian females, others sought to save the young girls out of human compassion. On the other hand, it demonstrates a very fundamental principle: truth will prevail. If the thousands of Armenians slaughtered in the genocide can not come back and testify before a court of law as to what happened, their grandchildren, born of mixed marriages with Turks, can. They need not go to court. Their mere existence as Turkish citizens of Armenian descent constitutes the most damning proof of what happened almost 100 years ago. For a discussion of the implications of this phenomenon in Turkey today, see: <http://www.reporter.am/go/article/2011-11-22-seminar-in-germany-focuses-on-inner-turkish-debate-of-1915->

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