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# Genocide Recognition, But at What Cost?

By Arman Grigorian  
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Political establishments in Israel and the US are actively weighing their options for punishing Turkey since the incident on Mavi Marmara and since Turkey voted to oppose the sanctions against Iran in the UN Security Council.

One would not have to be particularly cynical to predict that recognizing the Armenian genocide - something both countries have vigorously resisted for decades - would quickly emerge on their respective lists of options. A discussion was held in the Israeli Knesset about possibly putting the issue on the legislative agenda, and several American lawmakers (including some who have opposed recognition in the past) have made statements in favor of passing such legislation now. Many Armenians and at least some organizations that claim to speak on their behalf are pleased. Leaders of the Armenian community have already held meetings with relevant members of the US Congress, as well as with the leaders of the American Jewish organizations, welcoming this new trend.

The Armenian community's reaction to this development was, of course, even more predictable than the fact that this issue would come to the fore. For too long, proper recognition of the mass annihilation of Armenians has been the central item on the community's agenda, and for too long Armenians have had to endure the soul-crushing hypocrisy of both the Israeli and American political establishments, which scream louder than anybody in the world about the dangers of denying or minimizing past crimes against humanity, but until very recently were denying the Armenian genocide. They seem to have come around, finally. So some among us think we should rejoice.

Or should we? Is this really a development that Armenians should celebrate, welcome, and support? The relentless pursuit of genocide recognition has become so central to Armenian life in America (or even to Armenian identity in America and elsewhere in the Diaspora), that it is impossible to conceive of any answer to this question other than "of course." But we should at least try to think about a different answer, for enthusiastically welcoming this newfound sympathy for Armenian suffering in the Israeli and American political establishments is not free of costs, both moral and political.

Let us begin with the moral costs. First among them has to be the exploitative nature of this new twist. If this was actually a triumph of the long struggle to have the Armenian genocide properly recognized and commemorated, we would have a reason to celebrate and rejoice, although personally I believe Armenians would be better off dedicating their time and resources to causes other than seeking external validation for their suffering. Clearly, however, that is not what we are witnessing. What we are witnessing instead is a triumph of cynicism and opportunism. The shift on this issue has clearly come out of the desire to punish Turkey for crossing Israel and for resisting Israel's and America's extremely dangerous counterproductive policies toward Iran. In other words, we have an embarrassingly transparent attempt to use the Armenian genocide for a political agenda, which I find disgraceful.

That would be bad enough, but what makes it even worse is the political agenda in question, which brings us to the second moral compromise. This is all about punishing Turkey for taking the side of the Palestinians in Gaza and for breaking ranks with the US on the march to war with Iran. As a result, supporting this policy will be tantamount to supporting the Israeli

government against the people of Gaza, and supporting the advocates of attacking Iran against people who are desperately trying to prevent it. I have seen objections to expressions of similar concerns in on-line debates insisting that this has nothing to do with either the Palestinians or the conflict brewing with Iran. Some people have maintained that Israelis and Americans are doing the right thing, which is all that matters. Why do we need to worry about why they are doing it? Well, for the simple reason that by supporting this policy we simply will be taking sides, whether we want to or not.

But this awkward objection is nothing compared to the argument that concern for the Palestinians should not deter us from supporting the Israeli and American retaliation against Turkey, because Palestinians did not give a damn about Armenian sensitivities when they decided to accept assistance from the Turks. Yes, I have heard such an "argument," and all I can do in response is question the wisdom of not having laws that criminalize malignant thoughts. The efforts to rationalize support for the retaliation against Turkey have also zeroed in on the fact that Turkey is guilty of the same crimes for which it accuses Israel.

As the former foreign minister of Armenia, Raffi Hovannisian, stressed in his recent article in the Washington Times, Turkey denies the right to self-determination to its Kurds and supports Azerbaijan's denial of the same right to Karabagh Armenians while insisting that it should be respected in the case of the Palestinians; it subjects Armenia to a lockade -- since 1993 -- while trying to break the blockade of Gaza; it is not shy when it comes to using lethal force while it criticizes Israel and the US for doing the same thing, etc.

All of this is true more or less. It is also altogether irrelevant. The choice Armenians have to make is not between Israel and Turkey or America and Turkey. It is between the Israeli government and the people of Gaza, and between the pushers of war and their opponents in America.

The third source of moral misgivings for me has to do with the fact about the continuation of the practice in Israel and among many Jews around the world that consider comparisons between the Armenian genocide and the extermination of the Jews during WWII as not just empirically problematic, but unseemly. Such comparisons trivialize the Holocaust, they argue, which is tantamount to denying it.

Thus a member of the Knesset had to qualify his support for recognizing the Armenian genocide recently, apparently fearing that his position might be perceived as willingness to commit the unspeakable sin of drawing parallels between the two catastrophes: "I want to say this completely clearly: I am not making an analogy between the Holocaust of the Jewish people and the massacre of the Armenian nation, as tragic as the latter was. As a Jew, I can of course say that the Holocaust was unique. That's why I don't use the same term in reference to the Armenians." (Ha'aretz, 06.18.10).

What makes this statement particularly noteworthy is that its author - Haim Oron - is from the left-wing Meretz party. One can only imagine what Likudniks or the colorful characters in Avigdor Liberman's crew think or say about the Armenian genocide...

However, more appalling than this determination to continue with the "don't compare" nonsense even after recognition has been put on the table, is some Armenians' apparent willingness, indeed eagerness, to go along and to take whatever they can get, as if they are accepting some sort of a charitable contribution. And since one can hardly criticize the size of such contributions, they are not going to make a big fuss about a few statements

minimizing the moral significance of the horror inflicted upon their ancestors. I find such a posture considerably less than dignified. We should be demanding apologies from people, who consider comparisons between the Armenian genocide and the Jewish Holocaust instances of moral transgression, not offering them our support and cooperation.

Moral compromises are never good, of course, but they often have to be made in exchange for material and political benefits, or for a greater good. What I have said so far, therefore, can be criticized on the basis of this time-honored Machiavellian axiom. Surely, many Armenians will insist, the American war party's and Israel's combined determination to punish Turkey must involve some benefits for Armenians, which would justify the moral costs discussed above. Surely, it would be even better if that punishment resulted in pushing Turkey out of America's strategic orbit, so why should we not do everything we can to bring that outcome about? Because if we tame our reflexes for a moment and try to think about this a little more carefully, it will not be difficult to see the dangers of doing so. In reality, supporting the policy of punishing Turkey involves no real benefits other than getting a morally tainted recognition of the genocide (even that may fall through, if the big boys manage to patch things up) and involves substantial political costs and risks. What could they possibly be?

First, and most importantly, we know that trying to slow down the drive to attack Iran is one of the main reasons why Turkey has wound up in the American war party's and Israel's crosshairs. We also know that if Turkey were to be successfully coerced to change its stance, that attack will become more likely. And another thing we know is that in addition to being a disaster for the US and the entire Middle East, such an attack will be a disaster for Armenia, which the Armenians in the Diaspora claim to care about deeply. If that is indeed the case, they should not want such an attack to take place and should instead do everything they can to make it less likely. Jumping on the war party's and Israel's bandwagon to go after Turkey is precisely the opposite of doing so.

Second, as outrageously counterintuitive as it may sound, Turkey's continuing drift away from the USA, which is only going to accelerate if the war party continues to turn the screws on Turkey, is not necessarily a good thing for Armenians, or at least for Armenia. A Turkey that has drifted away from the US will be a less restrained Turkey, which can be quite dangerous for Armenia given the two countries' less than friendly relations. Moreover, deepening alienation from the US is going to push Turkey toward closer relations with Russia - a Russia which has obvious incentives to welcome such a trend and has already considerably improved its relations with Turkey. There are reasons to worry when a country's main ally and most threatening potential adversary start becoming friends, especially if that country is as small, vulnerable, and dependent on its ally as Armenia is on Russia. The small ally's interests typically get sacrificed during such shifts, which may happen in this case if it becomes necessary for Russia to sweeten the deal for Turkey at the expense of Armenia. Such a shift may also lead to an overall deterioration of Armenia's weight in Russia's strategic calculus, which neither the US, nor any other country will be able to compensate for in any meaningful way. Now, the Armenian community in the US may not be able to do much to stop any of this, but if indeed it cares about Armenia's security, it should think twice before contributing to the further deterioration of US-Turkish relations.

Third, it is certainly not a foregone conclusion that the rift between the US and Israel on the one hand and Turkey on the other will continue to deepen. Indeed, I think it is quite likely that Turkey will eventually

patch up its relations with both countries. If that were to happen, Armenians would end up being on the aforementioned bandwagon while its drivers have deserted it, which is hardly an attractive prospect. In other words, both the continuation and the reversal of the confrontational trend with Turkey do not look like attractive prospects from the Armenian perspective if they choose to contribute to that confrontation. The opposite choice seems to entail far fewer risks.

Fourth, support for the policy of punishing and coercing Turkey is not going to be received well in many Middle Eastern countries, because such support is inevitably (and correctly) going to be perceived as taking the wrong side in the Palestinian issue. I have already talked about the moral costs of such a choice, but it may have other undesirable consequences as well. More specifically, there are still large Armenian communities in a number of Middle Eastern countries, which may become victims of guilt by association. Whether blaming Armenians in Lebanon, Iran, or Syria for the choices made by Armenians in America is fair or justified is irrelevant. The only relevant thing is whether they are likely to be blamed or not, and such a likelihood is far from negligible.

Fifth, joining forces with the war party and the current Israeli government is going to alienate certain constituencies and political forces that have ironically been much more sympathetic to the Armenian narrative in the past. I am talking about the many progressive and anti-imperialist forces in the USA and a sizeable and growing segment of the Jewish community that have always been outraged by some Jewish organizations' and Israel's official attitude toward the Armenian genocide, and that today are justifiably more focused on what is happening in Gaza. I am also talking about those progressive Turks, who were holding mass demonstrations following Hrant Dink's murder and shouting "We are all Armenians now," who held protest vigils this year commemorating the Armenian genocide, and who are also more focused on what is happening to the people of Gaza, as well as on the dreadful prospect of a war with Iran. Being on the side of these forces is certainly the right place to be, but it is also the more prudent place to be, because the opposite camp behaves like a blind and intoxicated elephant that is going to find itself in a ditch sooner or later. No reasonable person should want to be associated with it.

What then should the Armenians and the organizations that speak on their behalf do? The first thing they should do is finally begin to question the wisdom of limiting the Armenian participation in American civil society to a single issue - the recognition of the Armenian genocide. This is not to say that Armenians are not justified in demanding proper recognition of the catastrophe of 1915. It is to say that subordinating everything else to that cause and pursuing that cause regardless of its costs and consequences, as well as equating that pursuit to whatever may negatively reflect on Turkey, is becoming more and more difficult to justify. This, however, is a plea for the long-term future. There are also things to be done in the short-term.

The position the Armenian community finds itself is not an easy one. It certainly cannot be expected to lobby against genocide recognition and tell Israelis and American lawmakers not to consider resolutions on recognition. But what it can and should do is refocus its voice and its lobbying power on helping stop the march toward a war with Iran.

It should tell the Armenian Caucus in the US Congress that that's the priority for Armenians today, not genocide recognition. It should also add its voice to the voices of those, including the many righteous Jews, who consider the situation in Gaza an absolute outrage. That is indeed what the victims of the Armenian genocide would want, because the moral lesson of

that calamity is not about getting recognition for our people's suffering or claiming our rightful piece of the American victimhood pie, but a solemn obligation to stand against oppression and injustice wherever it happens and whoever the victims are. Anything less is a desecration of their memory.

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