

# FACING ARMENIAN-TURKISH HISTORY OR DENYING IT?

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By Armen Yegharian, Armenia's ambassador to Canada, [Embassy Magazine](#), 3 August 2011

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First, it is unfortunate to refer to "an ongoing legitimate scholarly debate on the nature of the events of 1915, as recognized by several Canadian academics" here, as Canada is one of the many states that has recognized the Armenian Genocide both on legislative and executive levels.

Canada is one of the places in the world where some survivors of the 1915 Armenian Genocide in the Ottoman Empire found safe haven. So Canadian society has good knowledge about those events, the nature of which is not under any "legitimate debate."

Genocide Studies and Prevention, published by the Toronto University Press and one of the most authoritative scholarly journals on such issues, has run several articles on the Armenian Genocide by highly respected genocide scholars. In fact, the second issue of that journal was entirely dedicated to the Armenian Genocide.

I do believe there is the need for an open and unrestricted discussion in Turkey itself about the first genocide of the 20th century. Yet the fact that Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink was killed in the centre of Istanbul for speaking out on this subject, or that Turkey's Nobel Prize-winning novelist, Orhan Pamuk, was essentially expelled out of his native country for a similar reason, are not good indicators about sufficient freedom of speech or the existence of "legitimate debate" in Turkey on this issue.

Secondly, I do not wish to go into the details of the genocide, which have been overwhelmingly documented. But for the sake of example, I have to remind my colleague from Turkey about an Argentine court decision earlier this year, which after 11 years of meticulously studying thousands of materials from various archives from around the world, made a decision on the Armenian genocide.

In 2002, as well, the New York-based independent International Center for Transitional Justice concluded that the Ottoman massacre of Armenians "include all of the elements of the crime of genocide as defined in the Genocide Convention, and legal scholars as well as historians, politicians, journalists and other people would be justified in continuing to so describe them."

Moreover, in addition to Canada, there are more than two-dozen states and several international organizations—amongst them the most renowned International Association of Genocide Scholars—who have recognized and condemned the Armenian Genocide.

The pre-history of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide adopted by the UN on Dec. 9, 1948 is related to the most tragic page in the history of the Armenian people.

It was the absence of condemnation and the elimination of consequences of the Armenian Genocide that made the young philologist Rafael Lemkin ask his professor in 1921 why Armenians did not have the masterminds of the Armenian Calamity arrested. To that question, the professor replied that there was no law under which they could be arrested.

It was this answer that forced Lemkin to drop philology and get immersed in international law, dedicating his life to the study of crimes against humanity, which, among others, paved the way for the adoption of the 1948 Genocide Convention.

Raphael Lemkin stressed that the phenomena of genocide as a crime against humanity (a term used by the governments of Great Britain, France and Russia back in May 1915 to describe the predicament of the Armenians) existed much before the invention of the term itself.

Thirdly, I would like to believe that "Turkey is not and has not shied away from further examining that dark period of the First World War." But allow me to disagree that "it was Turkey's initiative to sign the two protocols in Zurich in 2009."

We diplomats have to be extremely correct when talking to each other or to the public. The Armenian-Turkish relations were in a deadlock when Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan initiated the normalization process with Turkey. It was Armenian president that invited the Turkish president to come to Armenia for a football match between out two teams.

We in Armenia were guided by the vision of a future in which generations would live in peace and safety. The invitation was accepted by President Abdullah Gul and eventually, the negotiating process finished with the signing of protocols in Zurich on Oct. 10, 2009.

The bottom-line principle for starting negotiations was to proceed without any preconditions. With this common understanding, we came to the agreements. And from the beginning of the process up until now, this approach has been shared by the entire international community, starting with Swiss mediators to the UN secretary-general, the OSCE, the EU, the US, Russia, France, Canada and many other countries.

Despite the fact that for 96 years Turkey has been continuously denying the Armenian Genocide, the Armenian side did not require its recognition by Turkey as a precondition for the normalization of the relations.

Paradoxically, it is Turkey that directly or indirectly has attempted to manipulate the issue, making it a precondition. What happened then we all know very well. Turkey backtracked and started to speak in the language of preconditions right after the signing in Zurich.

During US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's trip to Armenia in July 2010, she echoed the international community's common stance on this issue, observing that Turkey should take the steps that it promised and that the ball is in Turkey's court.

Finally, I wanted to inform my colleague from Turkey that the Armenian government has always had its archives open to everyone. Many bright minds from all over the world, including from Turkey, are conducting their research there.

A diplomat bears huge responsibility of being honest, correct and polite, and most importantly, respectful. As Arthur Schlesinger wrote: "Saints can be pure, but statesmen must be responsible." Some Armenians who survived the genocide are still alive, and many children of theirs work and live in this country. They probably don't need much, but they certainly need respect, and they, as in any civilized nation, cannot bear flat denial of their sufferings.

Therefore, we as diplomats, share our burden of being responsible to our generations past, present and future for the peace, prosperity and security of our region.

