FRANCE, TURKEY, AND THE POLITICS OF GENOCIDE

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Joe Mazur, Harvard Political Review, 25 March 2012

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Most recently, both houses of the French legislature have passed a bill that would make the public denial of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 to 1923 punishable by a whopping fine of 45,000 euros ($57,000) and a year in jail. The bill's inexorable advance was halted only when it was referred to the country's highest court, the Constitutional Council, where it was ruled unconstitutional in February. But this setback might not spell the end for the criminalization of Armenian Genocide denial. President Nicolas Sarkozy has asked his government to redraft the bill, his office explaining that "The President of the Republic considers that denial is intolerable and must therefore be punished." Sarkozy's dogged pursuit of the bill's passage has his critics wondering about his angle. Accusations leveled against Sarkozy at home range from attempting to curry favor with French voters of Armenian descent (a small but influential minority of about 500,000) to outright Islamophobia and an effort to prejudice the French people against Turkey's possible accession to the European Union.

The Turkish response to the legislation can best be described as apoplectic. In the wake of the bill's initial approval by the National Assembly last December, Ankara cancelled all bilateral talks with the French government, suspended joint military operations, and denied French warships and military planes permission to dock or land in Turkey respectively. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has even gone so far to accuse France of having committed genocide in colonial Algeria and threatened further, unspecified action against France if the bill becomes law.

Turkey's righteous indignation might be more convincing if it was not also glaringly hypocritical. When Erdogan, in a speech to parliament, insisted that the French bill "murdered freedom of thought", he seemed to have forgotten that Article 301 of the Turkish penal code makes it illegal to insult the Turkish nation, ethnicity, or government. Since its implementation in 2005, Article 301 has been used on many occasions to prosecute writers, journalists, and scholars who have criticized

Ankara's policy of vehement genocide denial or who have otherwise run afoul of the regime. It would seem, therefore, that Erdogan's definition of "freedom of thought" is as fluid as is politically convenient. Whatever the French motives for promulgating its genocide denial legislation and regardless of whether or not such legislation truly suppresses freedom of thought, Turkey simply cannot claim the moral high ground when it comes to free expression.

Moreover, Turkey's hysterical reaction to the bill has made it abundantly clear that the country is being forced to confront its own checkered history. In an interview with HPR, Harvard Professor of Armenian Studies James Russell shed some light on why the legislation elicited such a strong Turkish response: "In Turkey itself, denial of the genocide is one of the cornerstones of the culture. There has been a very systematic effort by the Turkish state not only to deny that the genocide took place, but also to eradicate signs that lived there." Russell further believes that the French legislation represents an important and long overdue reality check and rejects Turkish claims that the bill is intended to be racist or Islamophobic. "This isn't a matter of anti-Turkish bigotry. stems from a desire for historical recognition." Indeed, Russell views recognition as a move that would ultimately benefit Turkey and expressed optimism that such recognition would take eventually gain acceptance. "One has to encourage a change in Turkish civil values … I think Turkey's viable future depends on this issue. There has been a lot of progress and there will be more progress."

But ultimately, the controversy surrounding France's bill ceases to be about the skeletons in Turkey's closet or even about the Armenian Genocide specifically. Rather, it is a facet of a larger debate between those who would recognize and learn from historical fact and those who would stubbornly continue to deny the undeniable. As important as it is for Turkey and other governments to acknowledge the truth of the Armenian Genocide in order to reconcile the descendants of the victims with the descendants of the perpetrators, the true value of recognition is as a bulwark against future abuses. "The Armenian experience was one of the signal dangers of the twentieth century" explains Russell. The longer a crime is concealed, the longer lies take the place of truth, the easier it is for subsequent crimes connected to the first to proliferate and find acceptance."

While France's methods for ensuring the perpetuation of historical fact might run counter to the American concept of constitutional liberty and be perceived by Turks as a grave insult to their national identity, its government is addressing a hugely important issue that deserves the world's attention. In the almost 100 years since the extermination of Armenians by the Ottoman Empire and the seven decades that have elapsed since the Holocaust, the world seems no closer to the abolition of mass murder. Tragic chapters on Cambodia, Rwanda, Yugoslavia, and Darfur have instead been written in the annals of history with the blood of millions. If "Never Again" is to be anything more than just a mantra, perhaps the governments of the world would do well to play an active role in preserving the memory of calamities past.

After all, it was Hitler who wondered on the eve of his genocidal invasion of Poland, "Who still talks today of the extermination of the Armenians?"