

DEBATE ON GENOCIDE IN ISRAEL: RECOGNITION AND DENIAL

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*On the occasion of the 106th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, the Israeli newspaper **Haaretz** published a series of articles on the significance of the recognition and denial of the genocide by Israel and Turkey. The below article published by the Italian magazine **Gariwo** summarizes the opinions reflected in those articles.*

[Gariwo](#), Italy, 10 May 2021

The recognition of the Armenian Genocide by US President Joe Biden has led one of Israel's main allies to align with other 30 countries that have recognized the genocide. This has prompted some Israeli intellectuals to reflect, particularly in the pages of the *Haaretz* newspaper, on the position of Israel, and on the significance of the recognition and denial of this genocide. In recent days this reflection has turned into a question and answer on religion and politics in the relationship between Israel and Turkey regarding the Armenian Genocide.

Biden's acknowledgement of the Armenian Genocide was greeted with great satisfaction by a large part of the Jewish community. The vocabulary and arguments that Biden used in his note on the Armenian Genocide are closely linked to the topic of genocide prevention as discussed by the Jewish and Polish jurist Raphael Lemkin, who was an advocate of the Convention for the prevention and repression of genocide by the United Nations in 1948, a document certainly very dear to Israel and which was born precisely following the genocide of the Shoah. However, Israel persists in its refusal to call what happened to the Armenians between 1915 and 1916 a "genocide".

According to some, this refusal has mainly political reasons, and stems from the fact that Israel does not want to antagonize Turkey, its main Muslim ally in the Middle East. Marc David Baer, an expert in European and Middle Eastern history and lecturer at the London School of Economics, wrote in *Haaretz* an article entitled "Jews who made friends with Turkey and became genocide deniers". "The Jewish state should be the first", wrote Baer, "to recognize genocide wherever it occurs. But it prefers to remain officially silent rather than antagonize its economic and military ally, despite the anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli rhetoric of the current leader". According to Baer... this attitude has very ancient historical roots, dating back to when the Ottoman Empire welcomed Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal in the fifteenth century. "In the nineteenth century", writes Baer, "Ottoman Jewish intellectuals recycled pre-modern views" and "transformed the sultan, and by extension all Turks, into tolerant hosts of Jewish 'guests'." According to Baer, things did not change either with the massacre of Armenians or with that of Jews in the Nazi concentration camps, culminating in the Quincentennial Foundation, created to celebrate the "five hundred years of friendship" between Turkey and Israel and based not only on the denial of the Armenian genocide, but also of Turkish anti-Semitism. Baer writes, [for those writers to assume "that Turks and Jews had lived in peace and brotherhood for five hundred years meant not admitting that the Turks could have perpetrated a genocide against the Armenians". The relationship between Armenians and Jews, "natural allies" given their common history, is therefore, paradoxically, undermined by "decades of denial".

In this regard, a few days ago the Israeli journalist Ofer Aderet published in *Haaretz* an in-depth study on the obstructionism carried out by the Israeli Foreign Ministry in the organization of a 1982 academic conference that dealt with both the Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide. Aderet's article, based on documents from the Israeli state archives, reports the words of the then Israeli foreign minister, who wrote: "We will continue to diminish and reduce the Armenian question to the best of our ability and by any means possible". In his article in *Haaretz*, Aderet recounted the attempts to sabotage this conference, carried out for two consecutive months, to see it cancelled or deprived of the section dedicated to Armenia, which would have cast a shadow on the uniqueness of the Shoah and compared Turkey to the Nazis. Conference organizers said Turkey had threatened retaliation against Israel if the Armenian Genocide was mentioned at the conference. In fact, according to Israel W. Charny, an expert on genocides and author of *Israel's Failed Response to the Armenian Genocide: Denial, State Deception, Truth versus Politicization of History* (2021), the sabotage attempts were the work of Israel which, without external solicitations, acted for political reasons, denying the Armenian Genocide so as not to create diplomatic tensions with Turkey. According to the sources cited by Aderet, the foreign ministry convinced a large part of the guests - including the writer and Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Weisel and historian Yehuda Bauer - to withdraw from the conference, offering even money to those who resisted. Frances Gaezer Grossman, a young American researcher who had received a call from the Israeli consulate on the morning of her departure for Israel, said in an interview: "After the Holocaust and the creation of Israel, the fact that a Jew is told not to attend a conference to avoid repercussions is an affront to my dignity as a human being and as a Jew". The sabotage campaign involved prominent local diplomats and politicians, including Gideon Hausner, known for leading the trial against Adolf Eichmann. The conference was eventually held anyway, but with 150 people instead of the 400 initially planned, thanks to pressure from Israel...

Also on the pages of *Haaretz*, two other contributions interpreted Israel's refusal to recognize the Armenian Genocide on the basis of the relationship between Israel and the Holocaust. Recently, for example, we talked about an editorial by Eldad Ben Aharon, professor of Israeli studies and international relations at the University of Leiden. According to Ben Aharon, the link with Turkey is not the main reason why Israel remains anchored in its denial of the Armenian Genocide. Rather, Ben Aharon points out that the recognition of the Armenian Genocide would oblige Israel to carry out public commemorations which, according to the Jewish calendar, would coincide with those of the Holocaust. For many Israelis, writes Ben Aharon criticizing the constant "competition" that Israel experiences with the memory of other genocides, this would cast a shadow on the memory of the Shoah.

On the occasion of the last anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, Sivan Gaides had reflected on *Haaretz* on the oblivion surrounding the Armenian Genocide, especially in Israel, and on the lack of memory tools that the Armenian community has had to face with respect to its own history. He wrote, "While Holocaust education is considered the benchmark for responsible historical education

throughout the developed world, the descendants of the survivors of the Armenian Genocide still have to fight for the genocide to be recognized as such". Gaides is descended from Holocaust survivors on his father's side and survivors of the Armenian Genocide on his father's mother's side. According to Gaides, this happens in Israel because Israelis claim a **"trauma exclusivity"** whereby they refuse to look at the pain of others, however similar to their own.

The collective reflection on the reasons why Israel denies the Armenian Genocide has turned into a question and answer on the legitimacy of the definition of "genocide" with respect to the massacre of Armenians and on the relationship between religion and politics in Turkey. According to the two Israeli historians Benny Morris and Dror Ze'evi, an Armenian Genocide does not exist, while there is rather a genocide of Christians, which was carried out for religious and non-political reasons and which damaged Christians of different nationalities. The central thesis of Morris and Ze'evi is articulated as follows: first, the massacre of Christians in the territory of the Ottoman Empire was not limited to 1915-1916 but existed before, during, and after the First World War, that is, in the nineties of the nineteenth century with the autocratic government of Sultan Abdul Hamid II, between 1908 and 1918, and at the beginning of the republican regime of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in the Twenties of the twentieth century. Second, the massacre of the Armenians involved different groups, from the Assyrians to the Greeks to the Armenians, thus not being limited only to this ethnic group. Third, the reasons for the massacre were various but substantially religious rather than political, because the Turks saw Christians, more than Armenians, as enemies, and "in Turkey the nationalist motivation" was "deeply perceived as part of the religious one". According to Morris and Ze'evi, proof of this would be the fact that the Turks had also persecuted the Assyrians, who, unlike the Armenians, had no nationalist ambition. In short, the Turkish militiamen would have acted as in a "holy war", in which the "Turkization" was not a nationalist political project, but a religious project that provided for the elimination of all Christians. By supporting this thesis and the idea that the "Armenian tragedy during the First World War was not a genocide", the two Israeli historians in question read the Armenian massacre through the lens of a clash of cultures, and thus indirectly support the legitimacy of Israel in continuing to deny this genocide.

The article of Morris and Ze'evi was followed the next day by the response of Alex Galitsky, director of communications at the Armenian National Committee of America, an important Armenian-American organization that provides activism, training and information on the Armenian community in the United States. Galitsky said that Morris and Ze'evi's thesis is inconsistent, because the definition of genocide in the United Nations Convention for the Prevention and Suppression of Genocide in 1948 also defines genocide as an attempt to destroy, in whole or in part, a religious group and not just a national one. The massacre of the Armenians, Galitsky writes, was a genocide, and its denial corresponds to a "double murder" and a "consummation" of the genocide, because it deprives the present of the memory necessary for its prevention. In his article, Galitsky attacks Israeli intellectuals who, like Morris and Ze'evi, paradoxically participate in this continuation of the genocide, and cites a study that shows that Hitler himself was inspired by the figure of Ataturk.

Above all, Galitsky emphasized in his article that Turkey's denial of the Armenian Genocide stems from political motivations linked to Erdogan's ultra-nationalism, which have nothing to do with religion. In this regard, Galitsky cites Erdogan's behavior towards Kurds, who are Muslims, and his numerous allusions to Pan-Turan ideals. Among these, Galitsky cites Erdogan's public praise of Enver Pasha, one of the architects of the Armenian Genocide, and his alliance with the MHP, the Nationalist Movement Party, whose leader publicly said that the deportation of Armenians was "absolutely right", and "it would have to happen again, if the circumstances were the same as then ". In his response to Morris and Ze'evi, Galitsky also cites Gray Wolves, a far-right organization linked to the MHP and characterized not only by the denial of the Armenian Genocide, but also by marked anti-Semitism and denial conspiracy with regard to the Holocaust.

Galitsky's article, the latest in this series of contributions published in *Haaretz* on Israel and the Armenian Genocide, therefore emphasizes the link between Armenian and Jewish history. The United Nations has never officially labelled the Armenian massacre a "genocide", in part because it occurred before its founding. However, there is a broad consensus among academics and genocide experts, including many Israelis and Yehuda Bauer himself, that the Armenian massacre was genocide, and the United Nations itself defined it as such in the Whitaker report dated 1985.

The discussion that accompanied the 106th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide leads us to reflect on the all-political significance of the recognition and denial of the Armenian Genocide in Israel. In the first case, recognizing genocide means aligning oneself, especially by virtue of a common history, with the international bodies that deal with the prevention of genocides and identifying oneself with principles of democracy and respect for freedoms. In the second case, denying the genocide means privileging political convenience with a country characterized by negationist and ultra-nationalist positions, which in turn guide an instrumental use of history and memory with respect to which, according to the contributions listed here, Israel should take a position.

Comments



Sivan Gaides – 2021-09-11 02:14:58

Mrs. Sivan Gaides is a SHE, not a HE [mentioned in paragraph 6 of this article].