GENOCIDE EXPERT WARY OF ISRAEL/TURKEY DETENTE

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Raphael Ahren, Haaretz.com, 21 July 2011

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If Israel recognizes the Turkish genocide of over 1 million Armenians in the near future, it may be largely due to the decades long efforts of American-born scholar Israel Charny. But Charny, now living in Jerusalem, is wary of a renewed push for detente between Israel and Turkey, which may torpedo his campaign for recognition.

"The whole business of rapprochement with Turkey is a game that politicians should and must play, because we want to get out of that process as much as possible," Charny told Anglo file this week. "But I don't think it should be done with the illusion that we're dealing with anything but a totalitarian, dangerous government. I don't think we should ever compromise again on the ethical principal whether to deny the Armenian genocide or not - that should not be a basis for the attempt to remarry after the divorce."
Turkey vociferously objects to calling the events between 1915 and 1923 during which Ottoman forces killed more than a million Armenians as genocide. Israel, which considered Turkey an important regional ally until recently, never officially recognized the genocide. But after bilateral relations cooled down in recent years, especially after the last year's flotilla to Gaza, during which Israeli troops killed nine Turks - the demand to recognize the Armenian genocide gained strength.

The Knesset's tackling of the issue represents the fruition of decades of work by Charney, the longtime director of the Institute on the Holocaust and Genocide in Jerusalem. In May he received a prize for his work fighting for the recognition of the Armenian genocide by the southeastern European country's president.

"Professor Charny is a very fair person who stands on his principles - there is no one like him," said Georgette Avakian, the leader of the Jerusalem-based Armenian Case Committee, adding that if Israel ever recognized her people's suffering, it would to a great extent be thanks to Charny. "He is one of the few people in the world who really look for the truth," she said.

Charny, who was born in New York, co-founded and presided over the International Association of Genocide Scholars.

"Professor Charny is a true pioneer in the field, he is probably the first to introduce the people to comparative genocide studies, which includes recognition of the scope of the Holocaust but not forgetting about the suffering and genocides of other people in the world," said Marc Sherman, the New York-born director of information services at Jerusalem's Institute on the Holocaust and Genocide.

In the past, when Israel enjoyed better relations with Turkey, Charney often fought for recognition of the genocide, against Jerusalem's wishes. In 1982, he organized in Tel Aviv the first international genocide conference that featured Armenian speakers, Sherman said.

A few years later, after state TV was pressured not to air a film about the Armenian genocide, Charny arranged a private screening in a Jerusalem cinema. He also testified against revered American-Jewish historian Bernard Lewis, who was on trial in France for denying the genocide. "Charny never backed down from standing up and confronting the denial of the Armenian genocide," Sherman said.

But Charny does not deny Jerusalem's need for realpolitik.

The Knesset discussed recognition of the genocide for the first time on May 19. On June 29, MK Arye Eldad introduced a bill to declare every April 24 Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day.

His bill was rejected but will be discussed, together with a possible official recognition of the genocide, by the Knesset's education committee.

However, no date has been set yet for the discussion, the committee's spokeswoman told Anglo File. It is unlikely this will happen before the Knesset goes into summer break next month, she said.

"I totally understand that the people who run our country periodically have to make decisions that on the surface are not ethical and of the highest values because there are other value issues that take precedence. The survival of Israel absolutely is first priority," he told Anglo File in his book-cramped study in Jerusalem's Baka neighborhood. "But I've got lines to draw."

Despite legitimate political, economic or military concerns, Israel must not continue to deny the suffering of another people, if only because of its own suffering, Charney said.

"When it comes to Israel's denial of the Armenian genocide, I ask first of all: what would our government's and our people's reaction be to any government that denies the Holocaust?" he said.

A clinical psychologist by profession, Charny became interested in genocide studies in the 1960s after a having a dream.

"I woke up and the dream has led me to very powerful emotional experiences, including rage: How could they do what they did to our people in the Holocaust? How could human beings exercise such

a beastly cruelty?" he recalled. "Then I had a horrible realization: I was a specialist in human behavior, accredited from the best American educational and clinical systems, and I never learned one miserable word about human cruelty and evil."

It was then that Charny decided to dedicate himself to the study of genocides.

"The first thing I did was I wrote Yad Vashem and I asked them to direct me to books in their library about the psychology of the Holocaust and genocide. The answer was, we're so sorry, we have no such books."

Since then, Charny has written and edited more than a dozen books on the topic, three of which won the American Library Association's Outstanding Academic Book of the Year award. His latest work, "And You Must Destroy the Evil in You: We Are the Human Beings who Commit Holocaust and Genocide," came out this week in Hebrew.